

★★★
GEORGIAN
GENTLEMEN



SIAN ANN BESSEY

BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF *AN UNCOMMON EARL*

A man in profile, facing left, wearing a red top hat, a red coat with a white cravat, and white gloves. He is holding a sword hilt in his right hand. The background is a soft-focus landscape with green hills and a cloudy sky.

AN ALLEGED ROGUE

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A HISTORICAL ROMANCE

FROM THE BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF *AN UNCOMMON EARL*

SIAN ANN BESSEY



Covenant Communications, Inc.

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Communications, Inc.

Published by Covenant Communications, Inc.

American Fork, Utah

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First Printing: November 2021

ISBN: 978-1-52441-901-1

Praise for Sian Ann Bessey

“Sian Ann Bessey’s Georgian Gentlemen series is truly delightful. Each new installment is a new opportunity to dive into history and breathe the air of the past while making friends with new characters you can’t help but root for. *An Alleged Rogue* is one you won’t want to miss.”

—Traci Hunter Abramson, seven-time Whitney Award–winning author of the Saint Squad series and Guardian series

Praise for *An Uncommon Earl*

“Admirable, intelligent characters are at the heart of this well-plotted novel. Historical romance fans will find much to like about the protagonists and their progressive, humanitarian efforts.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Set in the late nineteenth century, *An Uncommon Earl* by Sian Ann Bessey is a charming historical romance. Beautifully written, it is an enchanting story with an engaging plot, endearing characters, and a heartwarming storyline. Each of the characters is well depicted and easy to love or hate, depending on their role. The protagonists are admirable, lovable, and relatable, but I especially adored Jane’s aunt, Lady Millward. In essence, she is the comic relief, and her charisma and wit add humor to the storyline, lightening the dramatic scenes. Containing accurate historical references, drama, and conflict, it is an enjoyable and captivating romance novel appropriate for all audiences.”

—Readers’ Favorite five-star review

“Bessey has quickly become one of my favorite authors for historical fiction. She is a master at meshing actual historical details with a fictional story.”

—Inkwell Inspirations

“Bessey easily endears her readers to her protagonists, and her wry sense of humor is delightful. Well-drawn characters are enhanced by an overbearing, bride-seeking mother and an aunt who is as wonderfully unconventional as this story, and Bessey allows leeway for many characters to emerge from behind corsets and cravats. Her prose is fluid and detailed and is historically grounded in the Chimney Sweepers Act of 1788 as we learn of the atrocious conditions of apprenticeship. A very enjoyable read, with enough substance that a sequel would be welcome!”

—Historical Novel Society

“An eloquently scripted historical romance novel by an author with a genuine flair for originality and the kind of driven narrative and entertaining storytelling that will fully engage the reader from cover to cover, *An Uncommon Earl* by Sian Ann Bessey is an uncommon, extraordinary, and unreservedly recommended addition to community library historical romance fiction collections.”

—Midwest Book Review

*For Dina,
who has spent years quietly and tirelessly going about doing good*

Acknowledgments

MY HEARTFELT THANKS GOES TO all those at Covenant Communications who work so hard on my behalf. My editor, Samantha Millburn, is—quite frankly—without equal. Margaret Weber and her team of graphic artists are truly remarkable. My publicist, Amy Parker, is nothing short of a miracle worker. I am forever grateful for their expertise, their encouragement, and, most especially, their friendship.

Thank you to my wonderful parents, siblings, husband, children, grandchildren, and friends. You each bless my life in countless ways. In particular, I would like to thank Emily Manwaring for her willingness to read anything and everything I send her, Laura Sommer for being my sounding board for covers and titles, and Kent Bessey for his unfailing love and support.

Special thanks to Traci Abramson for always being there to cheer me on through one more scene, and to my readers for sharing your excitement over reading those scenes when they are published. And finally, but most importantly, I am grateful to my Heavenly Father, who made this writing journey possible and who blesses me every day. I could not write without His help and guidance.

Chapter 1

Amsterdam, 1788

FREDDIE PAYNE STOOD AT THE window of a tall terraced house in Amsterdam. In the canal below, a barge loaded with sacks of wool floated past, undoubtedly destined for the mills in Haarlem. The Dutchman at the helm shouted a warning to an oncoming vessel before steering the barge to safety beneath the arches of the nearby bridge. A smaller craft filled with carrots and onions passed by, going the other direction. The two men on board wore the clothing of common laborers, and if their lack of boating skills was any indication, they were more at home in the fields than on Amsterdam's waterways.

With a contemptuous snort, Freddie moved away from the window. Why anyone would choose such onerous methods of making a living was beyond him. It took only a modicum of intelligence to realize there were far better, more lucrative occupations available for the taking.

He glanced at his reflection in the mirror that hung over the dressing table and straightened the lace on his sleeve. Yes, indeed. If a gentleman set aside his scruples, there were jobs to be had that took very little physical effort but paid huge dividends.

Over the years, Freddie's average height and ordinary brown hair color had worked to his advantage. Even his rather unusual gray eyes had proven less of a handicap to his anonymity now that he'd amassed a large collection of wide-brimmed hats. He glanced at the trunk lying beside the door, his anticipation mounting. It contained a rather startling assortment of garments and accessories that enabled him to meld into virtually any environment. Freddie was as comfortable loitering along the filthy docks of Liverpool as he was working the opulent ballrooms of London. He grinned. It was time to test his skills again. After spending three years lying low in Amsterdam, he had exhausted the last of old Dunsbourne's money. If he wished to maintain his life of luxury, he needed more. And England was the place to find it.

Adam Norton, Lord Dunsbourne, glanced at the sign hanging above the door of the small shop on the dingy street in Cheapside: Erasmus Dobbs, Hosier. Five years of searching for the man who had destroyed his father and decimated his inheritance had brought him to this spot. If the Bow Street runner's report was correct, the proprietor of this unexceptional establishment may possess information that would enable Adam to finally bring his nemesis to justice.

Taking hold of the brass knob, Adam pushed open the door. A bell rang overhead, and moments later, a short, balding man entered the musty shop from a back room.

Pushing his spectacles farther up his nose, the man gave Adam an expectant look. "Good day, sir."

"Good day." Adam walked past a table displaying various types of hose and approached the counter. "My name is Lord Dunsbourne. I am looking for a Mr. Erasmus Dobbs."

The flush of red rising above the proprietor's collar was a clear indication that he realized his chosen greeting had been a mistake. Unfortunately, it was all too easily done. Adam may have retained the bearing of a titled gentleman, but the thinning fabric at his jacket's elbows and the yellowing lace at his shirtsleeves belied his elevated position in Society.

"Forgive me, m' lord." The shopkeeper bowed. "I am Mr. Erasmus Dobbs. 'Ow may I assist you?"

"I was given to understand that you may be acquainted with a certain Freddie Payne," Adam said.

The merchant's welcoming smile became a scowl. "I know 'im," he said.

Adam's expression remained impassive, but his grip on the walking stick in his hand tightened.

"What do you know of the man?"

"E's a devious fiend, m' lord. There's not many I'd wish tossed into Newgate, but 'e's one of 'em."

"I could not agree more." Adam considered it extremely unlikely that the merchant wished Payne arrested any more than he did.

Unfortunately, Adam had long since come to the conclusion that along with being a cold-hearted villain, Freddie Payne was an undisputed genius. No matter the magnitude of his crimes, he had evaded capture for almost twenty years, and Adam was beginning to wonder if anyone would ever best the man. "Do you know of anyone who may know his current whereabouts?"

"No, m' lord. Freddie weren't one to make friends even when 'e were a boy. 'E 'asn't been seen 'round these parts fer years, and I can't say that anyone's missed 'im either."

Adam smothered his frustration. Freddie Payne had not been seen

anywhere for years. The man was a veritable phantom.

"But you knew him well enough to know his family?"

"Knew 'is father, I did. God rest 'is soul." Mr. Dobbs shook his head.

"Walter Payne didn't deserve the son 'e got. When 'is wife died, 'e was left t' raise the lad hi'self. But it weren't 'is fault that Freddie turned out so rotten." He frowned. "Fer Walter's sake, I gave 'is son 'is first real job. And what did Freddie do to thank me? Took off with ten pounds' worth of silk stockin's, that's what."

Adam surveyed the handful of boxes lining the shelves behind the counter. It would seem that Mr. Dobbs's inventory was limited. Ten pounds' worth of silk stockings would undoubtedly constitute a significant loss.

"I am very sorry to hear it. Were you able to recover any of the stolen items?"

"Not a one," Mr. Dobbs said bitterly. "I made sure all me friends and neighbors knew what 'e'd done. Ev'ry last one of 'em was keepin' a lookout fer me, but no one ever 'eard so much as a whisper 'bout Freddie after that. 'E just disappeared."

"So you have not seen or heard from Payne since then?"

"No, m' lord. I reckon the thievin' blighter knew 'e'd be done for if 'e ever set foot inside my shop again."

Adam had heard similar accounts from gentlemen of various walks of life who had been duped by Freddie Payne. But he had desperately hoped that Mr. Dobbs's prior association with the Payne family would set his particular situation apart from all the others.

"I imagine it's been a good twenty years since Payne was under your employ," Adam pressed. "Would you recognize him still?"

Mr. Dobbs set his jaw. "It wouldn't matter 'ow much 'e'd grown, 'ow 'e wore 'is 'air, or 'ow much 'e changed 'is voice, m' lord. If 'e was man enough to look me in the eyes, I'd know 'im."

"Why is that?"

"Freddie Payne's eyes are as cold as the sea and about the same color. I've never seen the like on anyone else."

"The sea presents itself in a variety of shades, Mr. Dobbs."

"Gray," the merchant said. "Pale, watery gray—the way the sea looks when a storm's comin' in."

It was not much, but it was something. And it corroborated the other accounts Adam had gathered from those who'd met Payne. Over the years, the crook had done much to alter his appearance, but his eye color was unchangeable.

"Do you know of anyone else who may have had contact with Payne in recent years?"

Mr. Dobbs shook his head. "Word around these parts is that 'e took hi'self off to the Dutch Republic so as to escape the London

authorities.”

Adam had heard the same rumor. It was not especially helpful to him now.

Mr. Dobbs offered Adam an apologetic look. “I wish I could ’elp you more, m’ lord. We’d all be better off with the scoundrel off the streets.”

“Indeed,” Adam said. He turned to go. “If you hear of anything that might offer a clue to Payne’s whereabouts, I’d be obliged if you would get word to me at Dunsbourne Manor.”

“Very good, m’ lord.”

Adam stepped out of the hosiery shop. Discouragement settled on his shoulders like a heavy, wet blanket. He had wasted a full day only to hit yet another dead end.

Directly across from him, Adam’s groom stood beside his carriage with the door open. Adam crossed the short distance quickly and stepped inside as rain clouds glowered in the sky, casting a dark shadow over Ironmonger Lane.

“Back home, Oliver,” Adam said.

“Right you are, m’ lord,” the groom said, closing the door behind him. The vehicle swayed slightly as Oliver climbed onto his seat, and moments later, the wheels started rolling. Ignoring the men and women going about their business in the bustling Cheapside district, Adam leaned his head back on the worn seat and closed his eyes. The return journey to Berkshire would take several hours, but it could not be helped. His family’s townhouse in London had been one of the first things to go when he’d discovered the full extent of the financial loss incurred after Payne had tricked his father into risking the bulk of the family’s fortune on a nonexistent bakery.

Adam pinched the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger as anger, despair, and frustration waged an all-too-familiar battle within his chest. The carriage wheels rumbled over the cobbled road, and Adam released a long breath. He may be no closer to capturing Freddie Payne today than he had been yesterday, but he had overcome disappointment before. He would press forward. If not for himself, then for Emily.

His thoughts turned to his sister, who, at age sixteen, was eleven years his junior and needed so much more than he could give her. She had never known their mother, who had died at her birth, and her memories of their father were limited to childish recollections. At age twenty-two, when his father’s heart had failed, Adam had been required to step into the role of Emily’s parent, and he was only too aware of how woefully unequal he was to the task. Especially now that she was coming of age.

Thankfully, his small but prudent investments were beginning to pay

dividends, and his gardener, Henry, remained encouraging about this year's apple harvest. Indeed, Adam was doing everything humanly possible to retain his family estate and recoup sufficient funds for Emily to have a modest dowry when she married. But what good would that do if she were never seen in social circles?

It was likely that very few gentlemen were even aware he had a sister—let alone one who was so sweet and so good. She would need at least one Season in London, but he had not the faintest idea how to go about organizing such a thing. And he had a horrible suspicion that her aging companion and former governess, Miss Glover, was equally unknowledgeable on the subject.

He sighed and gazed out at the passing scenery. Night was falling, and they were coming to the fringes of the city. Tall buildings lined the road, their even edges blurring in the twilight. The way forward did not seem as simple as it once had.

For five years, Adam had prioritized traveling to London at the faintest whisper of a sighting of Freddie Payne. Other than a desk full of documented evidence that the man had gone from being a wily thief to one of the most skilled forgers in the country, however, he had nothing to show for it. Adam was weary to his bones. He could not continue chasing down the elusive felon at the expense of all else—especially if the greatest casualty of his demand for justice was Emily. Like it or not, it was time to put aside his quest to right the wrongs of the past and focus his attention more fully on the future.

The late afternoon sun shone through the drawing room windows at Charwell Park, touching the furnishings and the two occupants of the room with a soft glow. Phoebe Hadford paused her needlework to watch a beam of light dance across the wall and smiled. The beam was a small thing, but it was cheery and bright, and it signaled the end of several days of rain.

"We have another dinner invitation, Phoebe," her mother said, looking up from the small pile of correspondence on her knee.

"Really? Who is it from?"

It seemed to Phoebe that they had dined with almost all their new neighbors at least once since moving to Berkshire almost five months earlier. That constituted over two dozen engagements, and she had to confess, she was becoming a little weary of them. It wasn't that she disliked social events—quite the opposite, in fact—but being the newest residents in the neighborhood meant that she and her parents were often singled out for special attention. And that was not always the most relaxing position to claim.

"Colonel and Mrs. Palmer are hosting a party to celebrate the colonel's birthday."

Phoebe's heart sank. The colonel was a large, jovial man who was missing his left index finger, and whenever he could claim an audience, he took great pleasure in relating the details of the battle at which he'd lost that particular appendage. His wife's temperament was similarly enthusiastic, but her particular passion was her garden, and she delighted in showing each and every plant therein to her guests.

"When is it?" Phoebe asked. Perhaps if they arrived a little late, they would be spared a third tour of the lady's prize-winning rose bushes.

"Saturday at seven o'clock." Her mother folded the note back into its envelope. "I shall write to accept the invitation, of course."

"Of course." Phoebe guessed that her mother's eagerness to attend another social gathering was also waning, but a refusal was out of the question. Her mother was nothing if not a stickler for maintaining propriety, and it would not do to risk insulting anyone so soon after arriving in the neighborhood.

"I had better go and inform your father," her mother said, rising to her feet. "You know how he is about such things. If he does not have a full three days to prepare himself for the event, he is quite upended."

"Well, you are offering him four and a quarter days this time. He should have no reason to fuss."

"You would think so, would you not?"

Phoebe bit back a smile as her mother sailed across the drawing room, the invitation in hand. Even if her father grumbled about attending the Palmers' dinner party at first, she had little doubt that he would

bend to his wife's demands in the end. He always did.

As the echo of her mother's footsteps disappeared across the hall, Phoebe set aside her stitchery and walked to the window. The sun was valiantly attempting to dry the last of the puddles on the gravel walkway. The rain that had fallen earlier that day had moved on, leaving a dampness in the air and a hint of the cooler weather that was to come. Phoebe glanced at the nearby oak. At the top of the tree, the leaves showed a touch of color—similar in shade to the golden chrysanthemum petals in the flowerbed beneath the window. Autumn would be here before they knew it.

Her gaze shifted to the end of the garden, where the chimneys of Bloxley Hall could barely be seen in the distance above the hedge. Phoebe's sister, Jane, had married the Earl of Bloxley not more than three weeks before. It had been a joyous celebration, and the happy couple had left on their wedding tour almost immediately afterward. Phoebe did not begrudge Jane her happiness for one moment, but she missed her fiercely. She and Jane had vastly different interests, but they'd always been loyal friends. Only now that her sister was gone did she realize how much the girlish chatter and laughter they'd always shared after an evening out had meant to her. Perhaps that was another reason why social engagements had lost some of their luster.

A robin flew over the hedge and landed on a lower branch of the oak tree. Phoebe watched as it cocked its head and puffed out its red chest feathers. Its distinctive and cheery song served as a timely reminder that Phoebe's rare bout of melancholy would not do. She and her family were fortunate to have been welcomed to the neighborhood so warmly. They would attend the Palmers' dinner, and she would enjoy time spent with their other guests. If the evening proved to be exceptionally entertaining, she would write to tell Jane about it afterward.

Chapter 2

ADAM WALKED THROUGH THE ORCHARD with Henry at his side. Early-morning mist floated in wispy tendrils above the ground, leaving his boots damp and the leaves above him glistening. "It's lookin' to be a grand crop, m' lord." His gardener did nothing to hide the pride in his voice. "We're finally seein' the rewards of all our hard work."

Adam nodded, pausing to study the nearest apple tree. Henry was right. He'd never seen the trees so fruit laden. And not only were there more apples than usual, but they were also uncommonly large. He reached up to wrap his hand around a King of the Pippins apple. The thin stem held firm. A couple more weeks and they'd be falling off the tree. A flicker of excitement coursed through him at the thought of what a bountiful harvest would mean to Dunsbourne Manor.

"You've done well, Henry," Adam said.

"Beggin' your pardon, m' lord, but none of this would 'ave been possible without yer vision fer the place."

Adam smiled. The Dunsbourne orchard had been neglected for decades. As a child, he'd often played amongst the overgrown trees, picturing himself as a great explorer adventuring through the tangled undergrowth or a soldier making forts within the trees' wide limbs. Never in his wildest imaginings had he considered the orchard as a future source of revenue.

"Tell me how the rest of our plans are coming along," he said, moving from the shade of the trees toward the nearby stone structure.

"The mill's all but ready, m' lord. The wheel come yesterday. Between me and the two fellows who delivered it, we got it situated."

Adam pushed open the wide doors of the old cart shed, anxious to see the new equipment for himself. The building was large enough to house four or five vehicles, but now that he owned only one carriage and the cart he used during the apple harvest, the remaining space had been cleared to make room for an apple mill.

It was unfortunate that the grinding stone had been delivered during his brief time in London. Had he retained his father's steward, the man would have seen to such details, but letting the steward go had been one of the many economies Adam had been forced to make upon his father's passing. Adam had taken over all the bookkeeping and the management of the estate, and Henry had agreed to oversee not only the maintenance of the gardens but also the cultivation of the apple orchard. It was a big job for a man entering his sixtieth year, and installing a cider press was well outside the old gardener's area of expertise. But given Henry's insistence that hedgerows be straight and flowerbeds be tidy, Adam was quite sure he'd insisted that the stone

be situated correctly.

The wooden trough they'd formerly used to break down the apples stood against one wall, alongside the press and a tidily bundled pile of horsehair cloths. On the opposite wall, a row of empty barrels waited like a line of rotund soldiers. A large, round stone stood in the center of the shed, about eight feet in diameter and three feet tall. A band of iron encircled its upper rim. A circular furrow had been carved into its surface, and at the stone's center, a sturdy wooden pole reached up to connect with the scaffolding that supported the axle of the wheel-like millstone.

Adam stepped closer and ran his hand over the new stone's smooth surface. "Have you tried it?" he asked.

"Aye." Henry pointed at the furrow that marked the millstone's path. "I reckon that wheel's twice as heavy as it looks. It takes a bit to get it started, but once it's movin', it glides like it's on ice."

"It may not be quite so smooth when the trough is filled with fruit," Adam said. "I'll talk to Oliver about bringing Molly in once a day to get used to the harness and the pull. The sooner the plow horse is comfortable with the process, the better."

Henry nodded. "I daresay we've got another three or four weeks afore we'll be workin' her hard, but it's best to get her prepared while we can."

"Do we have the help we need when the time comes?"

"Yes, m' lord. I 'ave three lads coming in from the village. Two of 'em have worked fer one of them big apple farmers down Hereford way fer the last couple o' years. So they'll know just what to do. Where Berkshire's more in the center of the country, they reckon our harvest will be a week or two afore theirs, so they'll 'elp out here till they're needed in Hereford."

Adam tensed. Herefordshire was the hub of cider production in England. If his vision for the Dunsbourne orchards were to be realized, he would be viewed as a direct competitor to those West Country farmers. "Is that wise?"

Henry frowned. "To my way of thinkin', the more experience we can bring on, the faster the 'arvest will go."

He was right. Knowledgeable hired hands would be invaluable. Especially this year, when the equipment was new and the volume of production would be so much greater than it had ever been before. Still, Adam hesitated.

"Our particular blend of apples must not be shared, Henry," Adam said.

Henry's eyes widened. "You'll never 'ave to worry 'bout that, m' lord. Not with me. We've both worked too 'ard to perfect Dunsbourne's cider to 'ave the recipe whipped out from under us."

Reproaching himself for allowing his suspicious nature to hurt the loyal old gardener, Adam offered him a grateful nod. "You have my thanks."

Henry shuffled awkwardly. "Well then, I should probably be checkin' on the asters in the front flowerbed. With all we've been doin' in the orchard, it wouldn't do fer me to neglect 'em too long." He bobbed his head and started out of the cart shed.

Adam released a frustrated breath. He could place the blame for his lack of trust in the good intentions of others squarely at Freddie Payne's feet. But despite his awareness of the unpleasant tendency, his cynicism emerged all too often.

Closing the cart shed doors behind him, Adam made the short walk to the stables. Oliver was outside, walking Molly. She was a broad-shouldered, sturdy animal. More than a match for the mill wheel, as long as she was willing to repeatedly walk a small circuit within the cart shed rather than the lengthy rows of a field.

"Good morning, Oliver."

The groom looked up. "Mornin', m' lord."

"Now that the millstone is in place, I'd like you to hitch Molly to the wheel for a short time every day. She must be comfortable with her role in the milling process before the fruit comes on."

"Very good, m' lord. I'll take her over there shortly."

Adam reached out a hand and smoothed it over the plow horse's neck. "Are you prepared to do your part to help Dunsbourne orchards turn a profit, girl?"

She turned her dark eyes on him and snorted gently.

"I reckon that means yes, m' lord," Oliver said.

Adam chuckled. "I sincerely hope so. She cost us a pretty penny, and we're counting on her."

"She'll come through, don't you worry. I 'ave a good feelin' about Molly."

As much as he appreciated his groom's confidence, Adam could not claim it for himself. He alone knew how much was at risk with the cider-making enterprise. He'd sunk almost all the money he'd recouped since his father's death into buying the necessary equipment to make it a viable business. It was an unorthodox approach to saving his ancestral home, but after poring over the estate books for months, he'd determined that it was the only solution that offered any chance of success.

"Let me know if she gives you any difficulties in the cart shed," he said.

"Yes, m' lord."

Leaving Oliver to his work, Adam crossed the cobbled courtyard and followed the path that led to the front of Dunsbourne Manor. Flanked

on either side by manicured shrubs and trees, the large, sandy-colored stone house sat in a slight hollow, with a wide lawn before it and a flower garden behind. Ivy clung to a good portion of the walls, reaching past the first floor to touch the eaves. Two rows of evenly spaced small-paned windows ran the length of the house, their white frames matching the white front door beneath the portico.

He walked up the steps, experiencing the welcoming embrace of the home that had been in his family for generations as he reached the door and entered the hall.

"May I take your hat and gloves, my lord?" His aging butler shuffled forward and extended his hand. Thompson had been at Dunsbourne Manor for as long as Adam could remember, and even though his movements were slower now than they used to be, he was as reliable as the tide.

"Thank you, Thompson."

"Adam! You're back."

At the sound of his sister's voice, Adam turned to see Emily standing on the wide staircase. Her smile was genuine and warm, and with a book in her hand she flew down the remaining stairs to join him.

"I was only gone one day," he said, touched by her enthusiastic greeting.

She crossed the marble-tiled floor. "You weren't here when I retired last night. I thought perhaps you'd been detained."

"I did not arrive back until very late."

"And yet, you have already been out."

He grinned. He no longer wore his hat and gloves, but there was no hiding his wet boots from her observant eyes. "But of course. Some of us have work to do."

"Shall I tell you something that would shock every member of the ton, Lord Dunsbourne?" Emily slipped her free hand beneath his arm and gave him a teasing look. "I am fully convinced that beneath that noble exterior of yours beats the heart of an apple farmer."

Adam chuckled. "I confess I do love walking the orchard first thing in the morning. And seeing the trees so laden with fruit is most satisfying."

She squeezed his arm, her expression suddenly more serious. "Will the crop be all that you hoped it would be?"

He had not told Emily just how vital this year's crop was to their futures, but in her uncannily discerning way, she had surmised enough to know it was terribly important to him.

"You should take a walk in the orchard to see it for yourself, Em," he said, guiding her toward the study. "It is full of the marvelous colors and smells of autumn."

"I will go there this very afternoon." She pinned him with a quizzical

eye. "But you haven't answered my question."

He should have known she would not be distracted in her quest for information. "In the next two or three weeks, we should be picking more apples than we've ever picked before."

Instantly, her smile was back. "I am very glad."

"It will be a relief to have them all harvested." He opened the study door and pointed at the book in her hand. "What great things are you reading about today?"

"Elephants," she said.

"Elephants?"

"Yes." She withdrew her hand from his arm and opened the book to a page that showed a map of the African continent. "Did you know that the leader of a herd of elephants is usually the oldest female, and she's called the matriarch?"

"Is that so?" Adam wasn't sure whether to be impressed or dismayed. He was quite sure that a study of elephants was not something on Miss Glover's approved reading list; nor was it a topic of conversation amongst proper young ladies in a drawing room. But how could he fault Emily for wishing to expand her mind? Particularly when she had so few diversions in her life beyond reading.

Emily nodded. But his lack of enthusiasm in her newfound knowledge must have shown because a line appeared across her forehead and her eagerness dimmed. "Would you mind if I read in here with you this morning?" She glanced at the armchair she usually claimed beside the fireplace, seeming suddenly unsure.

"Have a heart, Em. You cannot leave me now." Adam pointed at the stack of letters Thompson had set on the corner of his desk. "I shall need your moral support to make it through that awful-looking pile of correspondence."

Her lips twitched, and Adam's shoulders relaxed a fraction. He would not have her believing he thought poorly of her.

"As you told me a few moments ago, you were only gone one day," she said.

"Indeed." He eyed the rather formidable pile of letters and gave an exaggerated sigh. "But that, it seems, was quite long enough."

She giggled and moved over to the armchair. "I shall be here if you need me."

Adam watched her fondly as she took her seat and opened her book. They'd both inherited their father's dark hair and brown eyes, but that was where their physical similarities ended. He stood over six feet tall and had long since filled out the narrow shoulders of his youth. Emily was a diminutive five feet two inches in height—unless she stood on the tips of her toes, which she was wont to do whenever she wished him to take her seriously.

He stifled a smile at the thought of her last tiptoed attempt to persuade him that the barn cat's kittens belonged inside the house. On that score, he'd been immovable, and she'd finally realized that no matter if she pled with him eye to eye, he would not countenance half a dozen miniature felines climbing the draperies and furniture. Emily had not completely given up hope that she would grow another couple of inches. Seeing as there'd been no change in her height for almost two years, however, it seemed unlikely. According to their housekeeper, Mrs. Foster, Emily was exactly the same height as their mother.

Taking his place in the chair behind the large mahogany desk, Adam turned his attention to the letters. He truly did have more to go through than he did on a normal day, and it wasn't long before he was absorbed in reading his solicitor's response to his inquiry regarding branding Dunsbourne cider, followed by a short note from Mr. Toole. The Bow Street runner was informing him of uncorroborated reports of Freddie Payne sightings in Amsterdam, Liverpool, and Glasgow. With a grunt of frustration, Adam set Toole's letter aside. Freddie Payne was as elusive as smoke, but even he could not be in three different cities simultaneously.

Adam glanced at Emily. She had moved from her initial ladylike position on the armchair and was now curled up with her slippers feet tucked under her pale-blue gown, her face hidden behind her book. He shook his head slightly and reached for the next envelope. Breaking the seal, he pulled out an embossed card. It was an invitation to Colonel Palmer's birthday party. The card was halfway to the bin before Adam checked his instinctive reaction.

It was a credit to his neighbors that requests for his company at local events continued to arrive at Dunsbourne Manor, particularly as he had not made an appearance at any of them since his father's death. Most of his school chums and associates in London had ceased issuing him invitations years ago. Apparently, it took missing only two Seasons in Town to be largely forgotten. His loss of connections in London might prove to be an issue at some point, but surely, the best way to prepare Emily to enter London Society was to have her participate in social functions nearer home.

He glanced at the invitation once more. His memories of Colonel Palmer were of a rather pompous man who enjoyed talking of his experiences in battle to the exclusion of all else. But he and his wife had been solicitous neighbors over the years. Perhaps the colonel's birthday celebration was exactly the right setting for Emily's inaugural step into Society.

"Colonel Palmer is celebrating a birthday on Saturday," Adam said. "We have been invited."

"Hm. That's nice." Emily's vague response was muffled behind her book.

Adam squared his shoulders. "I think we should go."

There was a fractional pause, and then the book lowered.

"You think we should go?" Her eyes appeared even larger than usual.

"You and me?"

"Yes."

"But we never have before."

"I realize that." He had a sinking feeling that making this course correction was going to be harder than he'd first envisioned. "But perhaps it is time that we take a step toward socializing with our neighbors again."

She stared at him. Adam couldn't say exactly what kind of reaction he had expected to his suggestion, but he was quite sure it had not been silence. She closed her book and sat up.

"Adam, I do not know the first thing about how to conduct myself at such gatherings."

"Of course you do. Miss Glover has been giving you comportment lessons in preparation for your come-out for years."

"I am quite sure I stopped listening at age thirteen." Her hands were clasped so tightly about her book, her knuckles were white. "I . . . I . . . would surely embarrass myself and you."

Silently cursing himself for allowing his absorption in the affairs of the manor and Freddie Payne to blind him to his duty to Emily for so long, he rose to his feet and moved to sit on the armchair opposite hers. "You would never embarrass me, Emily. Never. You are goodness personified, and anyone would be privileged to spend time in your company. I have been selfish with you for far too long. It is past time that I share you with others."

"But . . . I cannot . . ." She glanced at her dress, and her expression when she raised her head again was even more stricken. "I have nothing suitable to wear."

Blast it all. He'd almost forgotten the practical reason he had not accepted invitations to parties or dances for the last few years. His drastic economies in the household budget had included discharging his valet and Emily's maid and cutting the acquisition of new clothing to a minimum. In truth, the only wardrobe items he'd purchased in the last five years had been the few day gowns Emily had needed because she'd grown out of her old ones. He could make do with fraying cuffs and a limp cravat beneath his old jacket. Emily, however, had nothing to choose from.

"We shall have a gown made for you," he said. He would find the money somewhere. "Mrs. Foster must know of a seamstress in the village."

“Miss Selfridge, yes. She has made gowns for me in the past. But did you not say that the Colonel’s birthday is on Saturday? I doubt she can make something that quickly. She usually takes at least a fortnight, and I would need to be measured and choose a fabric and a pattern and . . .” Her shoulders sagged as her list petered out. “I would scarcely know where to begin on choosing an evening gown.”

“But Mrs. Foster will,” Adam said, fervently hoping he was right.

He rose to his feet and walked to the door. Stepping into the passageway, he caught sight of the housekeeper near the stairs. “Mrs. Foster, would you join Miss Norton and me in the study for a moment?”

“Of course, my lord.”

Adam returned to stand beside Emily’s chair, and moments later, Mrs. Foster entered the room, slightly out of breath.

“How may I help you, my lord?”

“We are in need of your advice, Mrs. Foster.”

“My advice?” A look of relief swept across her face. “I daresay I can do that without much difficulty.”

“Miss Norton requires an evening gown for an event on Saturday. How would you recommend that we procure one?”

“Miss Norton? An evening gown?” If it were possible, Mrs. Foster’s eyes grew even rounder than Emily’s.

“Yes. For this coming Saturday.”

“I fear Miss Selfridge would not be up for so exacting a task at such short notice,” Emily said.

Mrs. Foster shook her head. “Creating an evening gown fit for the sister of a baron is no small undertaking, especially as you’ve not had a dress fitting in over a year.”

No dress fitting in over a year? It was a wonder Emily didn’t hate him for his parsimonious ways. He knew of no other female who would have gone half so long without demanding something new to wear.

“I’ve had no need of another gown,” Emily said. She frowned slightly.

“It has been some time since I have grown any taller.”

“Yes. Yes, it has.” Mrs. Foster eyed Emily thoughtfully. “Would you be so good as to stand, miss?”

With a puzzled look directed at Adam, Emily rose to her feet.

“Mrs. Foster?” Adam had seen that look on his housekeeper’s face before. It was a mixture of contemplation and determination, and it usually appeared immediately before she took on a rather challenging chore. “If Miss Selfridge cannot be prevailed upon to make a gown within a few days, do you have another suggestion?”

“There might be a way,” the housekeeper said. “Miss Selfridge may be unable to create a new gown in that amount of time, but she could likely alter an existing one.”

“Isn’t that the whole point?” Adam said. “My sister does not own any evening gowns at all.”

“No, my lord. But your mother had several, and when she passed, your father insisted that I leave her bedchamber exactly as it was when she was alive. I keep everything dusted, and I have taken nothing out. The late Lady Dunsbourne’s gowns are in her wardrobe still.”

Adam rarely entered his mother’s chambers, and he had certainly never considered the state of her wardrobe. “Would they fit my sister?”

“In length, I believe the gowns would be just right. I daresay the bodice would need to be taken in, but that is something a good seamstress could do in a matter of hours.”

It was a possibility, where only moments before they’d had none.

“What do you think, Em?”

“Would you be comfortable with me wearing one of Mother’s gowns?” she asked.

“Absolutely. And if Mother were here, I believe it would give her great pleasure to have you do so.”

She smiled a sweet, tentative smile. “It might make her feel a little closer when I face a room full of strangers for the first time.”

Adam nodded. He had a fairly good idea of how frightened Emily was by the prospect of this unexpected launch into Society, and he was astonishingly proud of her for facing it so bravely. “You will be marvelous, Em.”

He turned to the housekeeper. “Thank you, Mrs. Foster. As usual, we would have been lost without you. Would you go with Miss Norton now and help her choose a dress from our mother’s wardrobe? Then perhaps you would be good enough to arrange for Miss Selfridge to make the necessary alterations.”

“Of course, my lord.” She bobbed a curtsy. “I shall see to it right away.”

The housekeeper started out of the study, and Emily looked at him uncertainly.

“Go with Mrs. Foster and choose whichever gown you like best,” he said. “And after Miss Selfridge has finished working on it, we shall order some new ones to be made.”

“We shall?” Her wide eyes had returned.

“Yes,” he said firmly. “We shall.”

Chapter 3

THE HADFORDS WERE FASHIONABLY LATE to the Palmers' dinner party. As far as Phoebe was concerned, their timing was perfect. They entered the house just as Miss Georgiana Chapman and Miss Marianne Webb returned from a tour of the gardens with Mrs. Palmer. Both young ladies appeared slightly glassy eyed, but they perked up considerably upon catching sight of Phoebe in the hall. Mrs. Palmer instantly gave her attention to greeting Phoebe's parents, enabling Georgiana and Marianne to join Phoebe.

"Thank goodness you are come." Georgiana slid her arm through Phoebe's and turned her toward the drawing room. "If I had been required to exclaim over the incomparable beauty of one more flower, I might have expired."

"I could not keep all the dahlias, asters, gladioli, and delphiniums straight," Marianne said. "Truly. I have lived the last half hour in fear of calling one of Mrs. Palmer's prize blooms by the wrong name." Phoebe laughed softly. "You have my sincere commiserations. The last time I was here, the roses were blossoming. I do believe our hostess has at least fifty varieties."

"Fifty!" Marianne shook her head in amazement. "How could anyone remember the names of half so many?"

"I would say Mrs. Palmer is rather remarkable in that respect," Phoebe said as the lady in question ushered Phoebe's parents into the drawing room.

Phoebe and her companions followed them into the spacious room. The walls were painted pale yellow with white trim. Elaborate white crown molding ran along the tops of the walls and beneath the long marble mantelpiece. Wooden floors were polished to a shine, and a large floral rug lay between the two dark-green sofas and the occasional chairs. Every end table held an enormous vase of freshly cut flowers, and the paintings on the walls depicted men engaged in battle.

A quick glance around assured Phoebe that most of the guests were familiar to her. Georgiana's father, Lord Forsness, was conversing with Colonel Palmer and Marianne's older brother, Derrick, while Mr. and Mrs. Gosden were chatting with Marianne's parents near the fireplace. Mrs. Palmer was leading Phoebe's parents toward another couple whom Phoebe could not yet see well enough to recognize.

"No! I cannot believe it." Georgiana's stunned declaration accompanied a tightening of her grip on Phoebe's arm. "Marianne, tell me I am not imagining things."

Marianne was openly staring in the direction of Phoebe's parents, her mouth slightly open. "I . . . I do not believe so, unless we are

imagining the very same thing.”

“He’s truly here.” Georgiana had yet to move an inch. “And that young lady beside him must be his sister.”

“The one he has held captive all these years,” Marianne whispered.

“Captive? Who has been held captive?” Phoebe eyed her companions with alarm. “Whatever are you talking about?”

“The gentleman currently speaking with your parents is Lord Dunsbourne.” Georgiana pivoted so she was facing Phoebe. “He has not attended a social function for going on five years.”

“Why?” Phoebe could see nothing of the gentleman beyond a portion of his navy coat, tan pantaloons, and white wig.

“Because he gambled away all his family’s money,” Marianne said breathlessly. “And the shock of discovering that the family’s ruin lay in his own son’s hands caused the elder Lord Dunsbourne’s death.”

Phoebe swallowed. “Truly?”

Marianne nodded. “I was only fourteen at the time, but even I remember the tragedy surrounding Lord Dunsbourne’s passing. Everyone in the village was talking about it. The young Lord Dunsbourne had been home for only a few weeks when it happened.”

“Where was he before then?” Phoebe asked.

“In London, of course. Where else would he have been able to lose an entire fortune?”

“He lost everything?” If Phoebe’s memory was correct, Lord Dunsbourne was a baron. His stately home had been pointed out to her in the distance on one of her rides through the countryside. The house was beautifully situated, nestled in the hollow of Berkshire’s rolling hills and surrounded by large groves of trees. “Does he not own Dunsbourne Manor?”

“He lives there still. But he dismissed almost all the staff after his father’s death, and he has not allowed his sister out since then,” Georgiana said.

Marianne nodded. “Can you imagine? She has been a prisoner in her own home all this time.”

Phoebe could not imagine it at all. “Surely friends and neighbors have stopped by the house on occasion. And the vicar would take a particular interest in Lord Dunsbourne and his sister after the passing of their father.”

“Perhaps. At first,” Georgiana said. “But when every effort at reaching out is rebuffed, people stop trying.”

“Not everyone,” Phoebe said. “It appears that the Palmers extended them an invitation to be here tonight.”

“And they actually accepted.” Marianne was still staring.

Phoebe shifted to the right, hoping for a better view of the infamous baron. She caught sight of his profile—a strong jaw and narrow nose

—before he turned his head to respond to something her father said. Her father. What was she thinking? If she wanted to know more about their nefarious neighbor, she had only to cross the room to join her parents and receive an introduction.

“If you’ll excuse me,” she said, sliding her arm out from Georgiana’s. “I believe I shall go and make the baron’s acquaintance.”

“You plan to speak with him?” Marianne’s voice was little more than a squeak.

“Of course.” Phoebe was not sure if her motivation was simple curiosity or the desire to do something daring. Either way, the prospect of meeting someone with such a colorful past seemed rather thrilling. “He cannot be all bad, or the colonel and his wife would not have invited him here.”

“Well, he is most certainly not all good,” Georgiana huffed.

“He is exceptionally handsome.” Marianne had yet to lower her eyes from the man.

“Really, Marianne.” This time Georgiana took Marianne’s arm and gave it a firm tug. “You must look away, and we shall discuss something else entirely.”

With a sigh, Marianne faced her companion. “Very well. As long as it is not flowers.”

Suppressing a smile, Phoebe left the two young ladies to come up with a fresh topic of conversation and crossed the room to join her parents. Her mother saw her coming. “Phoebe, my dear, come and meet Lord Dunsbourne and his sister.”

Her father stepped aside, and Phoebe dropped into a small curtsy before raising her head for her first clear look at the baron. He was tall and broad shouldered. His wig hid his natural hair, but based on the dark color of his eyebrows and eyes, she surmised that it, too, was dark. His clothing, although well cut, showed wear, and the lace at his sleeves was limp.

“Lord Dunsbourne,” she said politely.

“Miss Hadford.” He inclined his head. His voice was deep and pleasant. “May I present my sister, Miss Emily Norton.”

The young woman at his side appeared very dainty when compared to the baron. She was slightly built and at least three inches shorter than Phoebe. Her dark curls were pinned to her head in a lopsided pouf, and her floral gown was elegant in the extreme. The lace at her neck and sleeves was yellowed, and the panniers at her sides were the widest Phoebe had ever seen.

Phoebe curtsied a second time. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Miss Norton.”

“And I you, Miss Hadford.” The young lady’s curtsy was stiff, but given the frame she must have under her gown, it was a wonder she

could move at all.

“Miss Norton was just telling us how much she enjoys reading,” her mother said.

“That is an excellent activity when you are trapped inside the house.” The words spilled out before Phoebe had thought them through, and she barely restrained herself from clapping her hand over her mouth. Not daring to look at the baron, she fumbled her way forward. “With September already upon us, I daresay it will not be long before we are all homebound due to inclement weather.”

“Yes. Although I hope we will have more warm days before winter sets in,” Miss Norton said.

“As do I.” Phoebe pressed her hand to her stomach. She needed to say something more, if only to ameliorate her earlier faux pas. “Do you have any favorite authors, Miss Norton? Or a poet, perhaps? I am always anxious for a good recommendation.”

Miss Norton glanced anxiously at her brother. He gave her a small nod. Did she require his permission to speak, then?

“I do not necessarily favor one author above another,” she said. “But my favorite books are the ones that teach me more about the world. Whether it be plants or animals, foreign lands or people, there is so much to be learned, and I find it all most fascinating.”

Not wanting to commit another social blunder, Phoebe worked hard to hide her surprise. She doubted there were very many young ladies so academically inclined—or at least, there were few who would willingly admit to it.

“You make me feel quite a dunce, Miss Norton. I spend most of my free time with a needle and thread and am not nearly so well-read as I should be.”

“Oh, but I am sure your needlework is beautiful.”

“It is, indeed,” Phoebe’s mother said, and Phoebe tried not to cringe. Her mother never let an opportunity pass to talk about Phoebe’s one laudable talent. “I am constantly amazed at what Phoebe can do with a needle.”

“My lords, ladies, and gentlemen.” The butler’s voice from the doorway drew everyone’s attention and, thankfully, put an end to her mother’s verbal approbation. “Dinner is served.”

Immediately, the Palmers’ guests relocated around the room. Ever mindful of rank, Lord Forsnes approached Miss Norton to escort her to the dining room. An emotion that looked remarkably like fear flickered in Miss Norton’s eyes as Lord Forsnes led her out of the room and Lord Dunsbourne stepped away to offer his arm to Georgiana. Phoebe’s heart went out to Miss Norton. She wished she could somehow reassure the young lady that she was among friends. Surely her brother was not so awful that he would treat her cruelly in public.

“May I have the honor, Miss Hadford?”

With a start, Phoebe turned to see Mr. Derrick Webb standing beside her, his arm extended, a self-assured smile on his handsome face.

“Thank you, Mr. Webb,” she said, setting her hand on his arm. “I would be delighted.”

As they followed the couples ahead of them out of the drawing room, Phoebe kept her eyes on Miss Norton. The baron’s sister was moving slowly, her head held high and her back stiff. Such awkwardness was to be expected while wearing such a cumbersome gown. Phoebe sincerely hoped there was nothing—or no one—else causing her further discomfort.

“It is quite something, is it not?” Mr. Webb said.

Phoebe dragged her attention back to the man at her side. “Forgive me,” she said. “What is it that you find so surprising?”

“That Dunsbourne would come out of hiding to attend the Palmers’ dinner party and bring his sister so shoddily dressed.”

“Miss Norton’s gown is hardly shoddy. It is made of the finest silk.”

“Come now, Miss Hadford. Your impeccable taste in clothing and up-to-the-minute fashion sense is legendary. I find it hard to believe that you would ever attend a social function dressed in such a monstrosity, or with your hair coiffured so poorly.”

Phoebe had always loved shopping for clothes and took great delight in wearing beautiful gowns, but her sister, Jane, cared little for them and always looked beyond such things. If there was one thing Jane had taught her, it was that there were far more important things than appearing as the belle of the ball.

“You are right, Mr. Webb,” Phoebe said as they entered the dining room together. “I likely would have chosen to wear something different, but that does not signify that I admire Miss Norton any less. I cannot claim to know her well, but in disposition, she reminds me very much of my sister, the new Lady Bloxley. And if that is true, I hope we shall soon be fast friends.”

They had reached their seats, but Mr. Webb remained uncharacteristically quiet. Phoebe allowed herself a small smile. Perhaps if she were really lucky, his shocked silence would last through dinner.

Adam had forgotten how much he hated wearing a wig. That fact alone was enough to make him think twice about attending any more social events. Unless, of course, it was no longer a requirement. He had been removed from Society too long to be up on the current fashions, but it had not escaped his attention that only he and the older gentlemen were wearing the itchy headwear. A quick glance around the table confirmed that most of the ladies and the dapper Mr. Webb wore hair powder, while Miss Hadford's and his sister's hair were free from any covering.

Sweet Emily. Adam's heart sank in unison with her drooping coiffeur. Mrs. Foster had done her best with his sister's thick curls, but she was a housekeeper, not a lady's maid, and the hairstyle was not holding up well. He hoped Emily was unaware of what was happening atop her head as she valiantly attempted to maintain a conversation with Lord Forsnes.

Mr. Webb was seated at Emily's other side, but the man's attention was focused exclusively on Miss Hadford, and given how attractive his dinner partner was, it was likely to remain that way. Adam spared a glance at the lady. She really was stunning: blonde curls framing a delicate face and blue eyes. Her lavender-colored floral gown set off her figure perfectly, and she was obviously as at home in this setting as Emily was uncomfortable. He looked away. He may have been gone from Society for a time, but he was all too familiar with ladies like Miss Hadford. They were butterflies: undeniably beautiful and predictably transient. She would tire of her dinner companion soon enough, and then her attention would flit to someone else.

"Tell me, Dunsbourne, what have you been up to these many months?" Colonel Palmer's booming voice instantly brought Adam back to his own situation and drew the eyes of all seated at the table. He hesitated for only a moment. "I have been developing a specialty cider."

His response would likely be met with astonishment—perhaps even disdain. But it was the truth. And of the two things that had consumed him for the last few years, Adam would rather discuss his new venture than his unsuccessful search for Freddie Payne.

"By Jove, have you really?"

The colonel appeared mildly impressed, and it suddenly struck Adam that he had been offered a perfect opportunity to promote his product. He was confident that if he could find buyers, the cider would be well received.

"I have," Adam said. "And I believe that even your discerning palate would find the unparalleled blend of flavors most pleasing."

"Is that so?"

"Indeed." Adam saw the glimmer of speculative interest in the

colonel's eyes. "In fact, I would be willing to reserve a barrel for you, should you be inclined to try it."

"Well, now." The colonel blustered. "An entire barrel is rather a commitment for something I have yet to taste."

"Perhaps." Adam raised an eyebrow. "Unless you find that it lives up to my commendation, and then one barrel would be not nearly enough."

Across the table, someone chuckled, and Adam turned to discover Mr. Hadford watching him.

With no attempt to feign innocence over being caught eavesdropping, his new neighbor inclined his head and smiled. "Forgive my presumption, my lord," Mr. Hadford said. "But I recognize a fellow businessman when I see one. You have me intrigued. I shall take a barrel of your cider."

The colonel frowned. "You'd best set aside a barrel for me, Dunsbourne. We are neighbors, after all."

"Of course." Adam worked to maintain a serious expression even as his chest expanded. Nothing would sell his product better or faster than word-of-mouth endorsements from well-respected local residents.

"One barrel for the Palmers and one barrel for the Hadfords. I shall make note of your orders immediately upon my return home."

"Capital," Colonel Palmer said and turned his attention to his food.

Across the table, Mr. Hadford met his eyes and raised his glass. Adam nodded in acknowledgment of the gesture. He had yet to take the man's measure. Instinct born of experience made him wary. But whatever Mr. Hadford's motivation may be, his willingness to place an order for Dunsbourne cider had most assuredly worked to Adam's advantage.

Farther down the table, Mr. Gosden claimed Mr. Hadford's attention with a question about the hunt. Adam reached for his glass. A prickling sensation that he was yet being watched caused him to tense. Shifting his head slightly, he met Miss Hadford's startling blue eyes. She held his gaze. An unfamiliar sense of awareness hummed between them.

"What say you, Miss Hadford?" Mr. Webb asked.

Miss Hadford blinked, and the connection was gone. She turned to her dinner partner and said something. Adam looked away, cutting into the steak-and-kidney pie on his plate with more single-mindedness than he had ever shown the dish before.

Chapter 4

IT HAD BEEN THREE DAYS since Phoebe had attended the Palmers' dinner party and her thoughts continued to dwell on the enigmatic Lord Dunsbourne and his sister, Miss Norton. It was not terribly surprising, therefore, that her afternoon ride took her toward Dunsbourne Manor. Her choice of direction was not consciously done, but as she rode, she wondered—for perhaps the hundredth time—what had prompted her reclusive neighbors to reenter society and whether they would do so again.

She had watched Miss Norton during the course of the evening and recognized the effort it had taken for her to maintain a fluid conversation at the dinner table. The young lady had lapsed into silence when they had all reconvened in the drawing room, but whether that was because Lord Dunsbourne had hovered nearby or because she had been emotionally spent, Phoebe could not tell. Lord Dunsbourne. His name alone conjured up a swirl of conflicting emotions. That a man would be so reckless as to lose his family fortune and so cruel as to keep his sister a prisoner in his home was beyond the pale. Phoebe's indignation rose at the thought of what Miss Norton must have endured these past years. And yet, the gentleman she had surreptitiously scrutinized at the Palmers' gathering showed none of the characteristics she would associate with a gambler or a bully. He had discussed his cider-making venture with thoughtful caution, and his expression while watching his sister had been one of concern rather than anger. At the table, when he had caught Phoebe looking at him, he had held her gaze without reproof. And her heart had pounded.

Phoebe sighed. If her father had been home, she would have approached him to ask his opinion of Lord Dunsbourne. But he had left for London on business the day after the Palmers' event and had yet to return. She did not know what had prompted his surprising offer to purchase a barrel of Dunsbourne cider any more than she could identify the emotion that had caused her own disconcerting experience with the baron. She knew only that her response had not been triggered by fear or revulsion. And that was problematic. Those were the feelings she should be having toward such a man. She shook her head slightly, attempting to clear her mind of such troublesome thoughts. Surely there was more than enough beauty in the shady woodland that separated her home at Charwell Park from the baron's estate to fully capture her attention.

A hint of color touched the leaves, and the ground was soft with rain-dampened earth and pine needles. It would be a few weeks yet before the crunch of leaves followed her horse's path through the trees, but

the musty smells of autumn filled the air. Up ahead, a thrush sang brightly. Phoebe's horse, Aria, snorted, and the bird took flight in a flurry of feathers. Phoebe smiled and urged her mount toward the break in the tree line just ahead.

Behind her, the young stable boy tasked with accompanying her on this outing clicked his tongue, and his mount increased its pace to keep up. They both crested the rise moments later, and Phoebe immediately reined Aria to a stop.

"Oh."

The single word escaped as a slow exhale, and she sat perfectly still in the saddle, taking in the view before her. The land fell away in a gentle decline, forming a natural hollow between the rolling hills. Nestled in the center of the small valley was a large, sandy-colored house surrounded by green lawns, tall trees, and tended gardens. Beyond the gardens, rows and rows of trees extended past a couple of outbuildings, all the way to the edge of a narrow river. Even from this distance, Phoebe could see orbs of red, green, and yellow amongst the leaves of the trees. They were apples. Lots of them.

"Tell me," she said, turning to the stable boy. "Is that Dunsbourne Manor ahead of us?"

"Aye, miss. It's usually approached from the High Brodmore road, an' the tall hedgerows keep it out of the sight of passersby." He leaned forward in his saddle. "It's right pretty, ain't it?"

She nodded. With the afternoon sun casting its light on the house, the sandy-colored stone glowed warm and inviting. A wooden bench sat beneath the mass of greenery clinging to the walls near the back door, and a thin trail of smoke climbed upward from one of the chimneys. A few blooms—most of them yellow and orange—still graced the flowerbeds, and from somewhere near the farthest shed, a black-and-white dog appeared. Phoebe watched as the animal ran to meet a man emerging from among the trees. Her breath caught. Lord Dunsbourne. She recognized his broad shoulders and easy gait from here. And that must be his apple orchard.

"Can we access the High Brodmore road from here without trespassing on Dunsbourne land?" she asked.

"The trail follows the river t' the road, miss. But whether or not it crosses Dunsbourne land, I can't say." He shrugged. "Is Lordship's never taken exception to anyone usin' it afore?"

"Very well." If possible, she would like to avoid further contact with the baron until she had determined how to act around him. "Let us make our way quickly."

The trail meandered down the slope through clumps of bracken and around blackberry bushes laden with underripe fruit. In a matter of

weeks, there would be a bounteous crop of berries. As though wishing to stake its claim, a starling landed on the nearest bush. The weighted branch swayed as the bird trilled a warning song. Aria flicked her tail impatiently, but the stable boy eyed the berries with interest. Phoebe smiled. The horses may not have much interest in the blackberry patch, but the young man was a definite threat.

The ground leveled off, and before long, they reached the river. The apple orchard was closer now, and Phoebe could see the fruit hanging on the branches more clearly. Up ahead, a flash of color caught her attention, and with a start, she realized there were two ladies sitting on the ground beneath the tree nearest the water. Her heart sank even as her gaze darted to the trail. She had not deviated from the prescribed public path, but she would be passing within a few feet of them.

One of the ladies looked up as she approached. Phoebe recognized her immediately and felt the stiffness in her shoulders subside. Miss Norton's dark hair was pulled up in a tidy plaited crown—a far sight better than the coiffured monstrosity she'd sported at the Palmers' gathering. She wore a simple green day dress, and she was sitting on a plaid blanket with a book on her knee. Beside her, an older lady with gray hair pulled up into a severe bun sat with her hands clasped around knitting needles, a ball of wool on her dark-blue skirt.

"Miss Hadford!" Miss Norton rose to her feet and greeted her with a shy smile.

Phoebe reined Aria to a halt beside the women. "Good afternoon, Miss Norton."

Miss Norton gestured toward the older lady. "Miss Hadford, this is my former governess, Miss Glover. Miss Glover, this is Miss Hadford. She lives at Charwell Park, not more than a mile away."

Moving stiffly, Miss Glover came to her feet and bobbed her head politely. "Pleased to meet you, Miss Hadford."

"And I you," Phoebe said. A former governess. And yet still a permanent resident at Dunsbourne Manor. Perhaps Miss Norton had not been so completely alone in the house as Marianne believed. Miss Norton glanced nervously from Miss Glover to Phoebe. "You are out for a ride, then?"

"Yes. But I had no intention of encroaching on Dunsbourne land. Forgive me if I have disturbed you."

"There is nothing to forgive. The public path has been here for decades." She tightened her grip on her book. "I enjoy coming out here when the weather is fine. It is a good place to sit and enjoy the sights and sounds of the river."

"And read an engaging book." Phoebe pointed to the volume Miss Norton was holding. "What are you reading today?"

A hint of color touched Miss Norton's cheeks. "A Discourse of English Trees. I . . . I was hoping I might learn more about the trees in the orchard. Unfortunately, I have yet to read past the growing need for oak trees to supply the navy with warships."

Phoebe smiled sympathetically. "Not quite the same, is it?"

"No. Not at all."

"Perhaps there will be something about apple trees later in the book."

"Perhaps." Miss Norton looked doubtful. "I daresay my brother could tell me all about them, but I was hoping to do this on my own."

"Your brother takes an active interest in the orchard, then?"

"Oh yes. He is out checking on the trees long before I rise in the morning and often does not return to the house until much later in the day."

Phoebe's suspicion that she had seen Lord Dunsbourne near the apple trees was confirmed, but the schedule Miss Norton described did not sound like the lifestyle of a hardened gambler. She wanted to believe that with regard to betting away his inheritance, at least, the baron had learned his lesson and reformed. But a wholesale transformation seemed unlikely. Could a gentleman bet on an apple harvest?

"He must be quite anxious about this year's crop."

"I believe he has high hopes for it." Miss Norton bowed her head, and Phoebe's stomach clenched. What was causing the young lady's distress? Was it something Lord Dunsbourne had done?

"I do not mean to pry, but you seem somewhat uneasy. May I do anything to help?" Phoebe asked.

Slowly, Miss Norton raised her head until her dark-brown eyes—so like her brother's—met hers. She swallowed hard. "My brother wishes me to have some new gowns made."

Whatever Phoebe had been expecting, it was not this.

"I see," she said, although, truly, she did not. Why would the anticipation of such an enjoyable endeavor cause a young lady to quake in her slippers?

"You saw the gown I wore on Saturday. It was . . . it was . . ." Miss Norton shook her head. All at once, she looked dangerously near tears.

"I would rather not feel so out of place at a social function again." She took a deep breath. "Miss Selfridge, the village seamstress, is coming to the house to measure me for two new evening gowns the day after tomorrow, but I have no idea what to ask of her. By my own admission, I am sadly lacking in my understanding of fashions or fabrics." Her cheeks pinked. "You were the most elegantly dressed lady at the Palmers' house, and I wondered . . . I wondered if you would be willing to assist me."

"You wish my help in choosing evening gowns?"

"Unless it would be too great an imposition." Miss Norton's book

would soon come loose from its spine if she continued to mangle it as she was now.

Aria shifted restlessly beneath Phoebe. She placed a comforting hand on her mare's neck as relief flooded through her. "My dear Miss Norton, I would be delighted. There are not many things that I can claim as skills, but I believe choosing fabrics may be one of them."

Miss Norton's lips turned up into a dazzling smile. "Truly?"

Phoebe laughed. "When would you like me to come?"

"Miss Selfridge is expected at two o'clock on Thursday. Would that suit?"

"If that is your preference. But might I suggest that I come sometime tomorrow? That way we can discuss colors and styles before you speak with Miss Selfridge. It might be best if you have some idea of what you would like when the seamstress arrives."

Miss Norton's eyes shone with happiness, and it appeared that her book might survive another day. "Tomorrow afternoon would be perfect. Thank you, Miss Hadford. I am most grateful."

"I shall look forward to it," Phoebe said. The phrase came easily, and she realized she meant it sincerely. She was coming to like Miss Norton very much, and if she could do something to improve her situation, she would gladly do it. "Until tomorrow, then."

She touched her heels to Aria's side. Miss Norton raised her hand in farewell, and with a parting smile, Phoebe continued down the trail toward the High Brodmore road.

Adam stretched out his long legs in front of the fire. Night was settling in, and this was the first time he had relaxed since rising. The gentlemen with whom he had associated before his father's death would likely not believe it if they were to learn how he currently spent his days. It did not matter. Truth be told, Emily's observation a few days previous was not too far off the mark. There was part of him—a rather substantial portion, actually—that thrived on working in the orchard. It was physically demanding, often dirty work, but there was something extremely satisfying about seeing the trees he had nurtured flourish and grow.

His eyes rested on his hands. They were becoming calloused. He flexed his fingers, feeling the slight ache from their overuse in the cart shed today. Molly was still adjusting to the new harness, but she was catching on quickly. She would be ready when they needed her to run the mill.

His musings were interrupted by a slight knock on the door.

"Enter," he called.

Emily stepped into the study. "Are you busy?"

"No," he said. "I am sitting as far from the ledger books on my desk as I can. If I don't see them, I can pretend they are not there."

With a small smile, she moved closer to her favorite armchair. She perched on its edge, her back ramrod straight.

Adam frowned. "Is something wrong?"

"No," she said, but her tightly clasped fingers claimed the opposite.

"Miss Selfridge is coming to the house on Thursday to measure me for new evening gowns."

"And that worries you?"

"No." She squirmed. "Well, it did. A little." Her shoulders drooped. "I do not know the first thing about evening dresses."

She was right. And if the gown she wore to the Palmers' on Saturday was any indication, neither Miss Glover nor Mrs. Foster knew anything more about them than Emily did. He had no desire whatsoever to be present during Emily's appointment with Miss Selfridge, but he, at least, had firsthand knowledge of London's ballrooms.

"If you need me to—" He paused. "Did you say the appointment did worry you—as in, it no longer does?"

She nodded, but her hands remained clenched.

"What changed?"

Her words came out in a rush. "I asked Miss Hadford if she would come to Dunsbourne Manor to guide me in my selections."

He stared at her. "You asked Miss Hadford to assist you? Here?"

Emily nodded. "When we were at the Palmers', I overheard one of the other ladies asking her opinion on the latest fashions coming out of

Paris. She obviously knows a great deal about such things. You must have noticed how beautifully she was dressed that night.”

Oh yes, he had noticed. He would have had to be blind not to. But that did not signify that he wished the lady to advise his little sister on a new wardrobe. Gowns like the ones Miss Hadford wore did not come cheap.

“When did you speak with her?”

“She happened upon me and Miss Glover when we were sitting by the river this afternoon. She was riding the public path and stopped to talk to us. She . . . she was most gracious.”

Adam did not miss the way Emily’s eyes lit up at the memory, and he experienced a twinge of conscience. Miss Hadford may not be whom he would have chosen to assist Emily, but he should be grateful that his shy little sister had taken the initiative to invite someone to Dunsbourne Manor. Increasing her social interaction was his new goal, after all.

Pushing back his personal misgivings, he mustered a smile. “I am sure Miss Hadford will be most helpful.”

“You truly do not mind her coming? She surely will not stay long.”

Lud. What kind of selfish monster had he become these past few years that she would feel the need to ask such a thing? “Emily, this is your home. You may invite whomever you choose to visit you here.”

She gazed at him in wonder, her brown eyes large and luminous, and he was struck by what a beauty she had become.

“Correction,” he said. “You may invite all but potential suitors. I fear that once Miss Hadford and Miss Selfridge have finished with you and you venture into Society again, I shall have quite enough to do sending away all the young men who seek you out of their own accord.”

His tease was rewarded by a flush of color in her cheeks.

“You know full well that you have nothing to worry about on that score,” she said, turning her face from him.

He shook his head slowly as the truth behind his jesting words settled upon him. “On the contrary. My concern over the matter is rapidly mounting.”

Chapter 5

FREDDIE SAT IN THE CORNER of White's in London, listening. To anyone who recognized the man behind the open newspaper, he was Nicholas Wilmott, an unassuming gentleman of means and diverse business interests. It had been some time since he'd frequented the club, but he had not gone out of his way to renew former acquaintanceships. Indeed, Freddie's primary reason for being there was to meet someone new—someone with deep pockets and a willingness to consider enterprising ventures. As luck would have it, one such gentleman sat immediately behind him.

"I say, Hadford, it seems you've done quite well for yourself since last I saw you. Not that your property in Yorkshire lacks merit, of course, but to have an estate in Berkshire entailed to you is quite something." Freddie would recognize Lord Bertrand's pompous voice anywhere. That the old viscount spoke so loudly was most advantageous.

"That is only half his good fortune." Another gentleman spoke. Mr. Alfred Shaw, if Freddie was not mistaken. "His oldest daughter is recently married to the Earl of Bloxley."

"You are correct on both counts, gentlemen." Hadford's response was measured. There was a calm confidence in his tone, and Freddie surmised he was a self-assured man used to making his own decisions. Excellent.

"Blast it all, man," Bertrand said. "Have the decency to spread some of that good luck around a bit, would you? There are some of us who could use a little extra in our coffers."

Hadford laughed. "I do not believe you are indigent just yet, my lord."

"Ah, but he is never one to turn down a solid investment," Shaw said.

"And neither am I." There was a pause. "What say you, Hadford? You are known to be a wily businessman. Where should we be looking for the best return on our money?"

Freddie held completely still. This was it. The information he needed to access Hadford's wealth.

"Textiles, gentlemen," Hadford said. "Our ladies cannot do without their fashionable gowns. No matter the cost, the demand for superior fabric remains steady."

"Nonsense," Bertrand said. "The supply of French silk cannot help but be affected by the growing unrest over there. Rumors are flying that the country is on the brink of war."

"I confess, I have heard similar reports," Hadford said. "But the struggles in France have yet to affect their Dutch neighbors. In Amsterdam, Mr. Willem den Haan has developed a remarkable printing method and is putting it to use on the finest cotton chintz imported by the Dutch East India Company."

"You don't say?"

"I have seen the cloth myself. There can be no mistaking its quality." Hadford paused to take a sip of his drink. "It goes without saying that should conditions in France continue to worsen, the value of Dutch cloth will only increase."

Freddie had heard enough. He set his newspaper on the nearby table and rose to his feet. It was time for an introduction.

Bertrand looked up as Freddie moved from his chair. "Good heavens, is that you, Wilmott? It's been some time since we've seen you at White's."

"Far too long," Freddie said. "I've been out of the country—in Amsterdam, as a matter of fact—on business."

"You don't say. Hadford, here, has just been telling us that we should look to the Dutch for some sound investing."

"Very wise counsel." Freddie turned his eyes on Hadford. The man must be close to his fiftieth year. His brown hair was beginning to gray, but his figure appeared trim and his coat well cut. Freddie inclined his head. "Nicholas Wilmott, at your service."

"Ah, you gentlemen have not met." Just as Freddie had hoped, Bertrand hastened to rectify the situation. "Mr. Wilmott, this is Mr. Hadford, originally from Yorkshire but recently removed to Berkshire. Mr. Hadford, Mr. Wilmott, newly returned from Amsterdam."

"A pleasure," Hadford said. He paused. "I don't suppose you had occasion to meet Willem den Haan or Rudolf Goor while you were in the Dutch Republic?"

"But of course," Freddie lied. "Mr. den Haan is an excellent fellow. His printed fabric cannot be equaled."

"Upon my word." Shaw appeared suitably impressed. "You are the second to offer a glowing endorsement of the Dutchman in almost as many minutes."

Freddie raised his eyebrows in feigned surprise. "Well, I daresay the praise is warranted."

"My sentiments exactly," Hadford said, looking pleased.

Freddie nodded. He pulled out his pocket watch and glanced at it, instantly contriving an expression of regret. "Forgive me, gentlemen. I fear time is my enemy today. I have some pressing business with my banker, so I must cut our discussion short." He inclined his head politely. "Lord Bertrand and Mr. Shaw, always a pleasure. Mr. Hadford, I hope we shall have an opportunity to discuss Mr. den Haan's fine textiles at a later date."

The gentlemen accepted his pretext without question.

"Good day to you, Wilmott," Bertrand said.

"And to you, my lord." Freddie wove between the tables and chairs, heading toward the exit. A handful of the room's occupants offered

him acknowledging nods as he passed, but he successfully avoided entering into unnecessary conversations. Within seconds, he was stepping out of the door and onto the pavement outside. He pressed his hat firmly onto his head, and sparing a quick glance at the two gentlemen approaching the popular club from the left, he turned right. Piccadilly Road was noisier than St. James Street. Hackney carriages drove by with a clatter of horse hooves and the rumble of wheels. Shoppers flowed in and out of the various establishments lining the busy road, occasionally greeting one another as they passed. Freddie waited for a large coach to pass, then darted across the street. Another glance at his pocket watch confirmed that it was five minutes past noon. All being well, Mr. Humes, the proprietor of the grocery shop he had frequented the last few days, would have left for his midday meal, leaving his young apprentice temporarily in charge.

A bell rang over the door of the grocery shop as Freddie entered. Waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dimmed light, he searched the shop for customers. A young woman dressed in a maid's attire was lifting a heavy basket off the counter, but otherwise, he and the shopkeeper's assistant were the only occupants.

"Thank you, Tim," the maid said. "I daresay I'll be back again in the mornin'." She shifted the basket into her other hand and turned to see Freddie for the first time. "Good day, sir." She bobbed a curtsy and hurried to the door as fast as her substantial load would allow.

"Good day, Millie," the young man behind the counter called after her. The doorbell clanged, and he turned his attention to Freddie.

"Nice t' see you again, sir. What can I 'elp you with today?"

"Good afternoon, Tim," Freddie said, stepping up to the counter. "A pound of tea, if you please."

He waited patiently as the young man scooped the powdery black leaves onto the scale and then poured them into a brown paper cone. Tim twisted the paper tightly and handed the small package to Freddie. "Anything else, sir?"

"No. That will do nicely, thank you. How much do I owe you?"

"Fourteen shillings, if you please, sir."

Freddie slipped his hand into the pocket of his breeches and withdrew a handful of notes. He studied the paper currency and frowned.

"I am afraid I have nothing smaller than a fifty-pound note."

Tim eyed the piece of paper in Freddie's hand with concern. "Makin' change may be a bit of a trick for a note like that, sir."

"Of course." Freddie tipped his hat up slightly and scratched his head.

"I don't suppose you'd be willing to run it to the bank and exchange it for smaller notes, would you, lad?" He smiled. "I daresay there'd be a five-pound note in it for you."

Tim swallowed hard. "Fer me, sir?"

“Absolutely. I would be honor bound to pay you for the service.” He gestured around the shop. “There is no one else here at the moment, but if anyone comes along, I shall tell them you will be back momentarily.”

Tim’s gaze moved from the fifty-pound note in Freddie’s hand to the door and back again. Freddie was well aware that he was offering the shopkeeper’s assistant more than he would make in six months working at the shop. He also knew that there was a bank conveniently located three doors farther down Piccadilly Road. It was the primary reason he had chosen this very grocery shop for his transaction.

“Mr. Hume left me in charge of the shop,” Tim said, indecision obvious in his eyes. “I don’t think he’d take kindly to me leavin’.”

“A good judge of character, Mr. Hume. He is fortunate to have such a trustworthy assistant.” Freddie went to slide the bank note back into his pocket. “I shall come back another time for the tea.”

The young man stepped around the counter. “I’d hate fer you t’ do that, sir. Especially seein’ as how I could be back right quick if there’s no queue at the bank.”

“You think so?”

Tim nodded and extended his hand for the note. “If any customers come in, tell ’em I’ll be back in a jiffy.”

“I’m much obliged,” Freddie said, handing over the fifty-pound note. Tim eyed it in wonder. “I’d best get crackin’.” He was already backing toward the door with the money clutched tightly in his hand.

With a smug grin, Freddie watched through the window. Tim wove around two ladies and the footman walking in their wake before breaking into a run and pushing open the doors of the bank. Freddie narrowed his eyes, wishing he could see through the bank’s shrouded windows. This was the only part of his current charade that was completely out of his control. He hated that fact, even as he recognized its necessity. Everything hinged on the bank teller recognizing Tim from the local shop and making the currency exchange with no questions asked.

He paced across the width of the narrow shop, turned on his heel, and paced back. The bank door remained closed. Freddie fingered his pocket watch. Five minutes. That was as long as he would wait. If Tim did not reemerge before then, he would walk away. The doorbell jangled, and Freddie swung around. An older woman entered, dressed in the coarse cloth of the working class. She bobbed a polite curtsy in Freddie’s direction before walking over to the buckets of fresh vegetables.

Freddie shifted. He was within an arm’s length of the door but could still see the bank through the shop window. Behind him, the woman was gathering carrots and placing them in her basket. Outside, three

boys ran past, chasing a dog. The dog barked, swerving as the bank door opened. Freddie tensed. Tim ran down the steps and started toward the shop. In his hand, he held a fistful of bank notes. Smoothing down his waistcoat, Freddie straightened his shoulders and schooled his features into a relaxed smile. The door flew open, and Tim burst in.

"I have the notes, sir."

The female customer had moved from the carrots to the turnips. At Tim's startling pronouncement, she looked up. Freddie turned slightly so she could not see his face.

"Nicely done, Tim." He reached for the money, gratified to see that it was a mixture of ten- and five-pound notes.

"Will you be paying fer your tea now?"

"Absolutely."

Freddie had all but forgotten about the small brown-paper package sitting on the counter. He stepped closer and picked it up. While Tim hurried to the other side of the counter, Freddie slipped another ten-pound note out of the pocket in his breeches and replaced it with the money Tim had given him.

"Take this," Freddie said, handing the shopkeeper's assistant the ten-pound note. "Keep the change. That should cover any inconvenience your trip to the bank may have caused."

The young man's eyes widened. "But, sir . . ."

"Good day to you, Tim."

Freddie already had the shop door open. An empty hackney carriage was approaching, and he hurried down the shop's front steps to hail it. The driver spotted him and slowed his vehicle. Freddie moved to the edge of the pavement and prepared to make his escape. It may be some time before the bank teller discovered that the young man from the local shop had passed him a forged fifty-pound note. Afterward, someone may be bright enough to question the authenticity of the ten-pound note currently in Tim's possession. But by then, Freddie would be far from Piccadilly Road.

The Hadford carriage rolled up Dunsbourne Manor's drive. Phoebe slid a little closer to the window and watched the beautiful house come into view. The late summer sun was shining, making the windows gleam and giving the warm-colored brick a rosy glow. Deep-green ivy clung to a portion of the walls, the color reflected in the abundant and magnificent trees and shrubs surrounding the house. It was, perhaps, the most inviting house she'd ever seen. And that was not what she had anticipated of a house owned by a gambler and a tyrant.

Phoebe pressed her hand to her stomach to quell the nerves fluttering there. Surely she had no need to fear. Miss Norton had invited her to visit, after all, and Phoebe would not be the only stranger on the premises. Her maid, Lucy, would be by her side, and the Hadford carriage, along with its driver, would be awaiting her outside. No matter if Lord Dunsbourne kept his sister trapped on his property, he could not prevent Phoebe from leaving when she was ready.

The carriage stopped opposite a white portico. The driver stepped down and opened the door. Phoebe took a deep breath and allowed him to help her alight.

"Wait here for me, if you would," she said.

"Very good, miss." He moved aside as her maid joined her.

"Are you ready, Lucy?" Phoebe asked.

Lucy grasped the large basket in her hands more tightly. "Yes, miss." Raising her chin, Phoebe mounted the stairs and knocked on the door. Moments later, the door opened to reveal an aging butler.

"Good day, Miss Hadford," he said with a bow. "Please come in. Miss Norton is expecting you."

The feeling that she was stepping into a prison dissipated the moment Phoebe entered the house. She had anticipated an atmosphere of dark foreboding. Instead, a brightly lit hall decorated with a large vase of freshly cut flowers and an assortment of paintings depicting the village of High Brodmore and the nearby countryside met her gaze.

"My name is Thompson, Miss Hadford," the butler said. "May I take your bonnet and shawl?"

"Yes. Thank you." Phoebe untied the ribbons beneath her chin and handed her outerwear to the butler.

"Very good, miss." He set them on a nearby table. "If you will follow me. Miss Norton is in the drawing room."

With Lucy a few steps behind her, Phoebe followed the butler down the passageway on the right. The first door was ajar, and Thompson stopped, gave a light knock, and pushed it open.

"Miss Hadford to see you, miss," he said.

Phoebe stepped into the room in time to see Miss Norton come to her feet with a welcoming smile.

"I am so glad you are here," she said. "Please come in and join us." She gestured to the lady sitting across the room with a new knitting project and a fresh ball of wool on her knee. "You remember Miss Glover, I'm sure."

"Of course," Phoebe said. "Good afternoon."

"And to you, Miss Hadford." The older lady's prim voice lacked warmth. Phoebe chose to ignore her tepid welcome. She had not come to visit Miss Glover. Taking a seat on one end of a pale-green sofa, Phoebe was pleased when Miss Norton joined her there.

"I confess, I was not sure that you would come." Miss Norton averted her eyes. "After my appalling showing at the Palmers' dinner party, I must seem a hopeless cause."

"Not at all." Phoebe surprised herself by reaching out and taking the young lady's hand in hers. "You must not think so poorly of yourself. You conducted yourself perfectly well."

Miss Norton grimaced. "I floundered repeatedly when attempting to maintain a conversation with Lord Forsnes, my gown was twice the width of any other lady's in the room, and my hair was a waterfall."

"I shall tell you a secret if you promise not to tell another soul,"

Phoebe said, leaning a little closer.

Miss Norton nodded, her eyes wide.

"I have yet to meet a lady who does not struggle to maintain a conversation with Lord Forsnes. If one's interests do not including fishing or hunting, there is very little to discuss with the gentleman."

Miss Norton smothered a giggle. "I managed fairly well through the first three courses because I had once read a book about the River Severn. I should have guessed that his interest would wane when the subject moved from the fish beneath the river's surface to the flora along its banks."

"There. You see." Phoebe squeezed her hand. "You were quite magnificent. I should have been at my wits' end before the first course was over."

"You are kind to say so. But I will not believe it if you tell me my appearance was equally magnificent."

Phoebe smiled gently. "Then I will forbear. But the next time you go out in public, you will be." She looked across the room to where her maid stood patiently waiting. "Would you bring me the basket, Lucy?" Her maid set the basket at her feet and then retreated to her former position near the door.

"Please be seated, Lucy," Miss Norton said. "You should not have to stand this whole time."

Miss Glover pursed her thin lips in disapproval. "She is the hired help, Miss Norton."

"So I suppose," Miss Norton said, wholly unaffected by her senior

companion's pointed reminder. "But she should not be made to wait the entire afternoon upon her feet."

Based on Miss Glover's expression, standing at attention was exactly what the older lady thought a maid should do, and Phoebe's admiration for Miss Norton rose still further as she calmly stood her ground regardless.

Lucy hesitated, looking to Phoebe for approval. Phoebe nodded, and the maid edged closer to an elegant Hepplewhite chair and slowly lowered herself onto its upholstered edge. It was the first time Phoebe had given conscious thought to the furnishings in the drawing room. There was nothing that looked to be very new, but everything—from the chairs to the drapes to the chandeliers to the pianoforte—was of the highest quality, and the pastel color scheme was tastefully done. "What do you have in the basket?" Miss Norton's question brought Phoebe back to her primary purpose with a start.

"Copies of *The Ladies' Cabinet of Fashion*." Phoebe smiled and reached in to pick up a handful of the small magazines. "You see," she said, opening the one on top to show the young lady beside her. "Each one includes fashion plates that illustrate the newest fashions in London." Miss Norton's gaze moved from the small pile of magazines on Phoebe's lap to the larger pile still sitting in the basket. "How many do you have?"

"I'm not sure that I can count that high," Phoebe said with a laugh. "But I brought them all because I wished you to see how fashions have changed over the years."

Miss Norton's expression brightened. "You make fashion sound like the grand rivers I have read about in my geography book that have completely changed their course over time."

"That is exactly it," Phoebe said. "Tiny alterations that, when combined, form something utterly different." She pulled a faded magazine from the bottom of the basket. "Look at this one. It was printed in 1747." Phoebe opened to a fashion plate of a woman wearing a dark-red gown. "You see how wide the panniers are. She has an open bodice with a separate stomacher, and the fabric is a heavy, dark silk."

"It looks much like my mother's dress," Miss Norton said. "The one I wore to the Palmers'."

"It does indeed." Understanding came with painful clarity. No wonder Miss Norton's gown had been an odd mix of exceptional quality and dated style. "If your mother wore a gown such as this in 1747, she would have been dressed in the height of fashion." Phoebe opened the magazine she'd received only last month. "Now look at this one." She pointed to the fashion plate of a woman wearing a cream-colored gown. "You see how the wide panniers are gone. A bodice with edges

that meet at the center front has replaced the open bodice, and the extravagant powdered hairstyles and white wigs are rapidly disappearing. Women need no longer hide their natural hair color, and the more curls they can achieve, the better.”

“This gown looks far more comfortable than the one I wore.”

“Oh, it is. And to be free of those awful sky-high coiffeurs and wigs . . .” Phoebe shuddered dramatically. “It is every lady’s dream.”

The enthusiasm in Miss Norton’s eyes faded as she studied the printed picture. “It may not be so elaborate as the first, but I fear even that hairstyle is beyond our housekeeper’s capabilities.”

The housekeeper. Why ever would she ask such a thing of the housekeeper? “Do you not have a maid who could assist you?”

“We have a kitchen maid, Peggy, who helps Cook in the mornings and Mrs. Foster in the afternoons. But she has no more experience with styling hair than I do.”

Phoebe fought to keep her bewilderment from manifesting itself. “You manage Dunsbourne Manor with minimal staff, then?”

“Thompson, Mrs. Foster, Cook, and Peggy work in the house, and Oliver and Henry are outside. Oliver is the groom. Henry works in the garden and the orchard. We will likely hire extra workers for the apple harvest, but my brother and I live very quiet lives, and we find that our current staff meet our needs very well.” Her face fell. “With the exception of hair styling, perhaps.”

There were no footmen or housemaids in the house. The baron employed no valet, and his sister had no lady’s maid. What was it that Marianne had said? The baron had dismissed the staff upon his father’s death. It appeared at least that much of her friend’s story was true. Phoebe took an unsteady breath.

“The next time you are to attend a social function, you must send word to me. I will loan you Lucy long enough for her to work her magic. Believe me, your hair will be magnificent when she is finished with you.”

“You . . . you would do that?”

“Of course.” Phoebe did not know how many simple pleasures Lord Dunsbourne had withheld from his sister, but this was one thing Phoebe could change. “Sharing is one of the joys of friendship.”

“We are to be friends?” Miss Norton’s smile lit her face.

“That is certainly my hope.”

“It is my hope also.” She lowered her eyes shyly. “Would you call me Emily?”

“Gladly,” Phoebe said. “As long as you will call me Phoebe.”

Emily nodded, and with a smile, Phoebe set another magazine on her knee. “And now, my new friend, we must focus on exactly what kind of gown Miss Selfridge is to make for you.”

Chapter 6

ADAM WALKED OUT OF THE cart shed and rolled his shoulders. They ached. Relocating forty barrels from the manor's wine cellar in one afternoon had taken its toll, but having the barrels stacked along the wall of the cart shed meant he was one step closer to filling them with cider. And that was a good feeling. If he could guarantee a couple weeks of warm sunshine, the apples would be ready to harvest right on schedule.

He stood aside as his groom led Molly back toward the stable. "Same time tomorrow, Oliver."

"Very good, m' lord."

Satisfied with his day's work, Adam started toward the front of the house. His mud-caked boots would need a good scrubbing. He grimaced. The dirt was not limited to his footwear, and he would need to hurry if he wished to bathe before dinner. Quickening his pace, he turned the corner only to come to an immediate and abrupt halt. Blast it all! The Hadfords' coach was parked in front of the house, and standing beside it were Emily and her guest.

Why on earth was Miss Hadford still here? It was exceptionally late in the day for a social call; he had assumed she would be long gone by now. He took a tentative step back. Retreating was by far the best option, particularly as it appeared she was making ready to leave. He took another step. But then Emily looked up and spotted him.

"Adam!" she called.

Miss Hadford turned. From this distance, her expression was impossible to decipher, but her appearance was as perfect as his was grubby. With a resigned sigh, he brushed his hands down his dusty jacket and stepped forward.

"Good afternoon, ladies," he said, inclining his head politely as he reached them.

Miss Hadford curtsied. "Good afternoon, Lord Dunsbourne."

Emily simply stared at him. "Whatever have you been doing?"

"Working," he said, clenching his dirty fingers as he repressed the urge to run them through his tangled hair.

She wrinkled her nose. "You seem muckier than usual."

Leave it to Emily to offer her brutally honest appraisal in front of Miss Hadford. Somewhat to his surprise, however, the mortification he would have experienced in the past was absent. Instead, he felt an odd sense of pride in his appalling state of dress.

"That is likely because the work was more rigorous than usual." He dared a glance at Miss Hadford.

She was studying him curiously. "Forgive me for being so bold, my lord, but exactly what kind of work were you doing?"

"The details would comprise a rather extensive list."

"I . . . I see." A hint of color touched her cheeks, and she bobbed another brief curtsy. "Then I shall keep you from your duties no longer. Good day, my lord. Good day, Emily."

She turned, and her driver stepped forward to help her into the carriage. Adam knew he should have offered. Then again, the driver was currently in far better shape than he was. He was simply saving Miss Hadford from getting her white gloves dirty.

The driver closed the carriage door and jumped onto the perch. With a flick of his wrists, the horses began to move, and soon the carriage was rumbling down the drive.

It had barely passed the first tree when Emily turned on him. "That was abominably rude. Why would you treat Miss Hadford so badly? She is my friend."

Adam blinked. He could not tell what shocked him most: Emily's censure, her claim of friendship with Miss Hadford, or her tear-filled eyes.

"I am quite sure Miss Hadford was relieved to enter her carriage without a muddy smudge on her clothing."

"That is not what I was referring to."

"What, then?"

"She asked you a question—one filled with genuine interest—and you rebuffed her."

"I did not rebuff her." Even as he said it, he thought back on his brief interaction with Miss Hadford. Had she considered his vague response a slight? In retrospect, her manner would suggest that she had. "She could have no interest whatsoever in the workings of the orchard."

"How do you know? You did not give her a chance."

Adam snorted. "Emily, young ladies like Miss Hadford think of nothing more than ribbons and lace and Society gossip."

"That is not true." Emily swiped at the tear on her cheek. "She is thoughtful and kind."

He could have reminded his sister that he had significantly more experience with the ladies and gentlemen of Society, but he was tired, and he was more than ready to end this uncomfortable conversation.

"Emily, if you believe my behavior offended Miss Hadford, I apologize. That was not my intention."

"I am not the one who deserves an apology." She began marching toward the front door. "But Miss Hadford most certainly does."

He followed after her. "Even if that were true, I have no plans to see Miss Hadford again in the foreseeable future."

"She is returning when Miss Selfridge comes. You can apologize then."

Adam stopped walking. "She will be at Dunsbourne Manor again tomorrow?"

“Yes. At two o’clock.” Thompson opened the door as Emily approached, and Adam hurried to catch up with her.

“Is that truly necessary, Em?”

She turned to face him, and he was relieved to see that her tears had dried. “Probably not. But I am immeasurably grateful that she is.” She offered him a weak smile. “As I said before, Miss Hadford is thoughtful and kind.”

He ran his fingers through his hair—this time without a care for the consequences. “Very well, then.”

“You will apologize?”

He could not say no. Not when her eyes shone with such hope. He nodded. “I will endeavor to speak with her before she leaves.”

“Thank you, Adam.” She breathed a relieved sigh. “She is my first real friend, and I could not bear to have her think ill of you.”

Adam stared at her. Then he swallowed the lump that had unaccountably lodged itself in his throat.

“Lord Dunsbourne! Might I have a word?” Miss Glover appeared in the hall, a carpet bag full of knitting in her hand and a frown on her face. Emily took one look at her former governess and made her escape up the stairs.

Adam pinned a weary smile on his face. “Of course, Miss Glover.”

The elderly lady moved closer and peered at him through her round spectacles. “Are you quite well, my lord? You appear to have a stain on your face.”

“I daresay there is more than one.” Adam dug deep for what little patience remained to him. “I am on my way to wash right now. What can I do for you, Miss Glover?”

“That lady who came to visit Miss Norton today—Miss Hadford was her name—I have my concerns about her, my lord. I thought you should know.”

Grateful that Emily had disappeared, he nodded politely. “What worries you, Miss Glover?”

“Well.” The elderly lady took a deep breath, and Adam braced himself. “Miss Norton is such a good, sensible girl. She has no time for frivolity. And she most certainly has no need of a flighty young lady who will fill her head with nonsense. The two of them were talking and laughing and looking at pictures in magazines half the afternoon.” Miss Glover looked as though she’d eaten something sour.

“Magazines, you say?”

“Yes, my lord. Full of fashion plates.”

The absurdity of his current situation was not lost on Adam. Only moments ago, Emily had been urging him to think the best of Miss Hadford. Now Miss Glover was attempting to convince him to think the worst of the lady. He rubbed his right temple in an effort to erase

the ache developing there. An image of Emily walking the house with her head in a book about elephants entered Adam's mind. Surely such reading material was no less questionable for his sister than a lady's magazine.

"I believe my sister was needing suggestions for some gowns she is having made," he said. "Perhaps Miss Hadford thought the magazines would be helpful."

"If you don't mind my saying so, my lord, Miss Selfridge is perfectly capable of helping Miss Norton with her gowns without any of the silliness I witnessed today."

Miss Selfridge was probably only five years younger than Miss Glover, and Adam doubted that the practical seamstress had giggled once since she was sixteen. The thought struck him like a blow. Emily was sixteen. When was the last time he'd heard her truly giggle? Was depriving her of young female companions yet another way in which he had failed her? After spending every day with a crotchety old governess and a dunderheaded older brother, it was no wonder she had enjoyed Miss Hadford's visit so much.

"I appreciate your concern, Miss Glover," he said. "Be assured, I shall consider the matter of Miss Hadford's influence on Emily most carefully." A satisfied smile appeared on the old lady's face, and Adam experienced an overwhelming desire to erase it. "In the meantime, however," he continued, "might I suggest that you spend the afternoon in your chambers tomorrow, as I believe Miss Hadford will be returning to Dunsbourne Manor for another visit."

Miss Glover's eyes widened. "You wish me to leave Miss Norton alone with the lady?"

"She will not be alone. Miss Selfridge will be here. And by your own admission, the seamstress is a model of respectability."

"Why, yes, but—"

"I would not wish the young ladies to offend your sensibilities," he said, speaking more firmly now. "Especially as I have every intention of checking on Miss Norton and Miss Hadford myself."

If anything, Miss Glover's eyes widened still further. They both knew that gentlemen customarily made themselves scarce on such occasions as a dress fitting.

"Very well, my lord. If you are sure I cannot be of assistance."

"Enjoy having a quiet afternoon to yourself, Miss Glover," he said, even more sure of his suggestion now than he had been when he'd made it. "Miss Norton will be well attended." He inclined his head. "And now if you will excuse me, I must clean up before dinner."

“Cherries ripe-ripe-ripe!” The street vendor’s familiar call reached Freddie through the window of the small room he’d leased on Marylebone Street. “Come buy! Fresh today!”

Freddie’s gaze moved across the table at which he sat. The remains of his meal—a mediocre eel pie and two-day-old bread—littered the wooden surface. He frowned. The landlady would need to provide better fare if she expected him to keep paying for meals.

Supplementing her poor-tasting offerings with cherries from the street vendor every day was not good enough. He deserved better.

He rose to his feet and jangled the coin purse at his side. The money he’d acquired through his trickery at the grocery shop on Piccadilly had been a good start. But it would not last long. If he wished to live in London with the same level of comfort he had enjoyed whilst in Amsterdam, he would need a far larger income. And the sooner he set about securing it, the better.

Crossing the room, he took a seat at the small writing desk beneath the window. He set a fresh piece of paper before him, took up his quill, and gazed unseeingly at the faded painting of the Thames hanging above the fireplace. His letter must be worded carefully. It must appear urgent enough to elicit a rapid response while requiring the recipient to pen at least half a dozen lines of prose. Six lines of clear script was all it would take for Freddie to duplicate the handwriting well enough to forge a letter. He smiled smugly. Counterfeiting another man’s hand was becoming easier and easier. He dipped the quill into the inkwell and began to write.

26 Marylebone Street, London

15 September 1788

My Dear Mr. den Haan,

Word of the high quality cotton chintz being produced at your facility in Amsterdam has reached London, as have rumors of your interest in procuring investors for the new printing process you are developing.

One of my merchant ships recently arrived in London a full month ahead of schedule. The successful sale of its cargo finds me with an unexpected surplus of funds and the need to make a swift yet sound investment. If you are interested in receiving additional financial backing for your fabric-printing enterprise, please reply with a detailed proposal by return of post.

Yours sincerely,

Nicholas Wilmott

Freddie leaned back in his chair and read the missive from start to finish. It was short but to the point. It would do very well. He pressed a piece of blotting paper to the drying ink and withdrew his sealing

wax. The letter must go out in today's post. Only then could he consider the first phase of his grand scheme complete.

Chapter 7

PHOEBE FELT SICK. IT HAD been a mistake to eat luncheon before returning to Dunsbourne Manor. Her nervousness over the possibility of seeing Lord Dunsbourne again had been bad enough. Combining her mounting anxiety with a bumpy ride down pitted country roads in the carriage had been a grievous error in judgment. She should have ridden Aria. Or better yet, she should have sent a note to say she was indisposed.

She leaned her head back against the carriage cushions and closed her eyes. No. She could not have done that. No matter how disreputable or ill-mannered her brother might be, Emily was lovely. Her sweetness was a refreshing change from the cattiness Phoebe often encountered among her peers, and Emily's total disregard for social climbing reminded Phoebe of her sister, Jane. Phoebe managed a rueful smile. The truth was, now that Jane was married, Phoebe needed a good friend just as much as Emily did.

The carriage slowed, and Phoebe opened her eyes to see the front portico of Dunsbourne Manor appear through her window. She took an uneven breath.

"Are you well, miss?" Lucy asked from the seat across from her.

"My stomach is a little unsettled," Phoebe said. "I expect that once I am out of the carriage, the fresh air will help." It was a reasonable hope. And one that promised positive results—as long as being outdoors did not also mean that she encountered a certain baron posing as a farmer.

Her cheeks flushed as she remembered Lord Dunsbourne's brusque response to her question about his work. Had he considered her interest impertinent? Or was there a reason he'd been unwilling to share exactly what he'd been doing? He clearly had no interest in conversing with her. That was fine. She set her gloved hands calmly on her knee. If she saw him again, she would simply ignore him. Dunsbourne Manor's front door and the Hadfords' carriage door opened in unison. The driver helped Phoebe alight as Emily ran down the steps to meet her.

"You are come!" Emily cried.

Despite her stomach's uneasiness, Phoebe laughed. "Well, that is a warm welcome indeed."

Emily smiled and slipped her arm through Phoebe's. "I was hoping you would arrive before Miss Selfridge because I thought you might enjoy seeing Mother's gowns. They are dated in design but are still quite beautiful."

"I would love to see them."

"Come along then," Emily said, drawing her into the house. "Miss

Selfridge prides herself upon being prompt, so she will likely be here any minute.”

Pausing long enough to hand her bonnet and gloves to Thompson at the door, Phoebe accompanied Emily up the stairs. Her view as she climbed only enhanced her first impression of the vast entry hall. The polished banister rail and paintings on display were stunning, and she marveled that so large and open a space could be made to feel so welcoming with little more than natural light and freshly cut flowers. “This way,” Emily said when they reached the landing. She turned right, guiding Phoebe and Lucy down a passageway and stopping outside a dark oak door. “This was my mother’s bedchamber.” She turned the handle and pushed open the door. “I asked Mrs. Foster if she would set the prettiest gowns out in here.”

Phoebe felt as though she were walking into a rose garden. The furnishings were elegant, the upholstery pale pink and cream. Pink flowers peeked out among the faded greenery on the wallpaper, and the mirror above the dressing table was adorned with silver roses. A heavy swag of cream-and-pink-striped fabric hung from the top of the four-poster bed and matched the bedspread below. Half a dozen ball gowns lay on the bed. The styles and colors differed, but each one was as stunning as the next.

Phoebe stepped closer and ran her fingers across a shimmering turquoise silk ball gown. “They are beautiful.”

Emily nodded. “The turquoise one is my favorite.” She pointed at a familiar gown on the other side of the bed. “Miss Glover insisted that the floral one with the cream lace suited my coloring better, so that is the one Miss Selfridge altered for the Palmers’ dinner.”

Phoebe studied Emily in the afternoon light. The cream color would, indeed, complement her dark hair and dark eyes, but so would every other color currently on display. Indeed, Emily was as beautiful as her brother was handsome. Phoebe’s fingers stilled on the yellowed lace. Heaven help her. Where had that thought come from? She would do well to remember the baron’s disreputable past and unpleasant disposition before considering his dark-brown eyes, firm jaw, and broad shoulders.

She cleared her throat. “I think the turquoise color would look lovely on you. If that is your favorite, perhaps it could be made over into something new.”

Emily eyed the gown skeptically. “The last time we tried that, it did not turn out well.”

“I think if we give Miss Selfridge some specific instructions—like taking out the fabric used to cover the wide panniers—we might find a rather wonderful new gown hidden beneath all this silk.”

Hope flared in Emily’s eyes. “And that would be less expensive than a

new gown, would it not?"

"Most assuredly. The fabric is already here."

"I should like that. Until the apple harvest is over . . ." She paused and began again. "My brother is insisting upon new gowns, but I would prefer to keep the cost down wherever possible."

Phoebe eyed the remaining gowns on the bed with a critical eye.

Emily would be surprised to know how much money Phoebe's knowledge of fabrics and styles had saved her father over the years.

She offered her friend an encouraging smile. "Have no fear, Emily; it can be done." This was a challenge she was fully prepared to win.

Emily would get her new gowns, and Lord Dunsbourne would be pleasantly surprised by the seamstress's final bill.

"Miss Selfridge is here to see you, Miss Norton."

At the sound of Thompson's voice at the door, both young ladies swung around.

"Please, have her come in," Emily said.

He bowed and ushered in a tiny woman with wispy brown hair fading to gray. Her nose was long and thin, and when she scurried into the bedchamber, Phoebe was put in mind of a somewhat frantic mouse.

"Forgive me, Miss Norton. I did not mean to keep you waiting." Miss Selfridge's voice was as squeaky as Phoebe remembered from when Marianne had introduced them at the church several Sundays ago.

"You have done nothing of the kind, Miss Selfridge," Emily said. "I was simply showing Miss Hadford my mother's old gowns."

"Ah, yes, of course. They are quite magnificent." The seamstress acknowledged Phoebe with a bobbed curtsy. "Miss Hadford, a pleasure to see you again."

"Good day to you, Miss Selfridge," Phoebe said.

Miss Selfridge's gaze darted around the room, her eyes taking in Lucy's presence near the door before returning to Emily. "Miss Glover is not here. She is well, I hope."

"Perfectly well, thank you," Emily said. "She is spending the afternoon in her rooms today." Emily gestured toward Phoebe. "Miss Hadford has kindly offered to share her opinion on our choices, should the need arise."

Phoebe caught the seamstress's slight frown an instant before it disappeared.

"My maid, Lucy, is at your disposal, Miss Selfridge," she said.

Miss Selfridge perked up a little. "Very well. As I measured you so recently for the alteration we made to the floral gown, there is no need for us to repeat that procedure today. Instead, we shall begin by choosing the fabrics for your new gowns."

She withdrew a bundle of fabric scraps from her basket. "Set these out, if you please, Lucy." She offered the bundle to Phoebe's maid.

“Lining them up along the dressing table would do nicely.”

Lucy obediently laid the fabric swatches in a tidy row.

“There now.” Miss Selfridge picked up the piece of dark-green silk nearest the corner and handed it to Emily. “Do you not think this would be perfect for an evening gown?”

Phoebe waited, wondering what Emily would say.

“It is very nice,” Emily said. “Although, perhaps not quite what I had in mind. I think something lighter—in color and weight—would suit me better.”

She met Phoebe’s eyes, and Phoebe gave her an encouraging nod. Regardless of the laughter and mindless chatter they had shared over many of the fashion plates they had reviewed yesterday, Emily had been listening.

Miss Selfridge gave her a startled look before reaching for another silk, this one pale blue. “This is a beautiful shade. And far lighter than the green.”

“Yes,” Emily said. “It is lovely.” She hesitated. “Do you have any chintz in stock? I have been told the fabric holds dyes just as well as silks, and I would very much like a pretty print.”

Phoebe grinned. She was quite sure Emily also remembered that cotton chintz was significantly less expensive than silk, but to focus on the fabric’s positive qualities was a far better way to win over the seamstress.

“Yes, Miss Norton.” Miss Selfridge offered Emily a selection of swatches.

Emily sifted through them. “What do you think of this one, Phoebe?”

She held up a pale-green fabric with a tiny, white, floral print.

“It is lovely,” Phoebe said. “And with some white lace, it would be stunning.”

With a pleased nod, Emily reached for a magazine lying on the end table beside the bed. She flipped it open to the center page and pointed to the fashion plate they had chosen the day before. “Can you make this gown with that fabric, Miss Selfridge?”

The seamstress gaped at Emily. “Why . . . why, yes, Miss Norton. I believe so.” She moved closer so as to see the picture more clearly.

“You wish the bodice to tuck into the skirt just so?”

“Yes,” Emily said. “Exactly like the picture.”

The seamstress nodded slowly. “I can do that.” She glanced up from the picture. “May I retain the magazine for reference? Just until the gown is made, you understand.”

Emily looked to Phoebe, who gave an assenting nod. She could spare one magazine out of so many. “You may.”

The seamstress slipped the magazine into her basket and turned her attention back to the fabrics. “The pale-green chintz is a very fine

fabric, Miss Norton, but there is nothing quite like silk for evening wear. Your mother would settle for nothing less. For your second gown, I would strongly recommend choosing one of the silks.”

Miss Selfridge’s assertive comment hit its mark, and the confidence Phoebe had seen in Emily only moments before seemed to ebb. Her friend looked at the row of silks on the dressing table, and her shoulders sagged.

Phoebe stepped forward. “Emily had the same thought, Miss Selfridge,” she said. “As a matter of fact, just before you arrived, she was telling me that she would like her second dress to be reworked from the silk used in her mother’s turquoise gown.”

“The turquoise one?” Miss Selfridge moved to stand beside the gown in question and ran her hand beneath the pleats, examining the fabric carefully. “Silk can be difficult to work with a second time around.”

“True. But the fabric still has considerable wear left in it, and the color shows no sign of fading. Miss Norton will not be wearing panniers, so the extra yardage in the skirt would allow for significant alterations.”

Emily gave Phoebe a grateful look and produced a second magazine opened to another fashion plate. “I should like it to look like this.”

Miss Selfridge studied the picture. “To change the shape of the bodice so dramatically would be no easy feat.”

“I have a feeling that after you have applied your expertise with a needle to this gown, the new version will look even better than the original.” Phoebe was not above using praise to help their cause along. “We are extremely fortunate to have you living in the village, Miss Selfridge.”

The mousy woman held her head a little higher. “I daresay it could be done.” She fingered the lace at the sleeve. “The lace has not fared so well in storage as the silk.”

“Agreed,” Phoebe said. “But I would guess that you have a bolt-end of lace that might work perfectly for just such a job. You could not charge so much as you would for a new bolt just arrived from Belgium, of course.” She paused to allow the subtle reminder to sink in. “But how marvelous to have it displayed on a gown such as this. You could make your clever use of the lace remnant be the talk of the village.”

Miss Selfridge unrolled her tape measure thoughtfully. “I do have one bolt-end at the shop,” she said. “It’s as fine a piece of lace as I’ve ever seen, and there may be sufficient to do these sleeves with just enough left over for the neckline.”

Battling to keep a triumphant smile at bay, Phoebe turned to Emily. “What do you think of that idea?”

“I think it sounds marvelous,” Emily said, her eyes shining. “How soon can you start, Miss Selfridge?”

Adam had rarely felt more empathy for Daniel of biblical times. Approaching his mother's chambers with a mandate to apologize to Miss Hadford should not be equated with entering a lion's den. But it certainly felt that way. As did the possibility that he was to be eaten alive—even if only metaphorically.

He was close enough now to see that the door was ajar and to hear the murmur of female voices. He paused and ran his hands down his navy jacket. It had seemed wise to change out of his working clothes for his next encounter with Miss Hadford—not because such things mattered to him, of course, but because they mattered to Emily. He straightened his shoulders. That was why he was putting himself through this torture. For Emily.

Up ahead, the door opened wide and Miss Selfridge scurried out carrying a large basket. She was followed by a young maid who was barely visible beneath a billowing mound of turquoise silk.

"This way, Lucy." The seamstress was already at the top of the stairs. For one panicked moment, Adam wondered if the maid would even see the stairs, but she tilted her head to one side of her voluminous cargo and hurried after Miss Selfridge without missing a step.

As the two women disappeared, Adam moved closer to the open door. "I am excessively proud of you, Emily." Miss Hadford's voice reached him, and his feet slowed once more. "You handled that beautifully." "I could not have done it without your help."

"You most certainly could. I was nothing more than a little moral support."

"Thank you for speaking up about Mother's turquoise silk. I had hoped I could use it, but Miss Selfridge seemed so set upon using one of hers . . ." Emily's voice trailed off.

"I have no doubt Miss Selfridge was offering you her honest opinion," Miss Hadford said, "but it is well to remember that she is also running a business. Saving you money is not her first priority. Your mother's silk is in perfect condition, and although it may take Miss Selfridge a little longer to unpick a few seams, it will save you a significant amount of money in the long run. Silk is not cheap."

Adam's brow puckered. If he didn't know better, this conversation would have him believe that Miss Hadford spared a thought for her father's pocketbook when replenishing her wardrobe.

"Do you think Miss Selfridge is capable of all that I asked?"

"I do." Adam could hear the smile in Miss Hadford's voice. "And you will look stunning in both gowns."

"Even the made-over one?"

"Especially that one. Not only will you have the comfort of wearing something your mother once loved, but you will also have the thrill of knowing that you came about it far less expensively than anyone

would ever guess. Believe me, it is a secret that will bring you great pleasure.”

“Have you done it with your own gowns?”

Adam recognized Emily’s skepticism; he felt it too.

Miss Hadford laughed. It was a pleasant, cheerful sound. “All the time. I love the challenge of creating something beautiful for less money than my father thinks possible.”

“You are known for dressing so finely,” Emily said. “No one would ever know.”

“That is why it is so much fun.”

The swish of skirts alerted Adam to the ladies’ movement in the room. Giving himself a mental shake, he moved toward the doorway. There would be time enough later to determine whether or not his eavesdropping on this conversation would affect his view of Miss Hadford. For now, he needed to pull himself together and approach her with more civility than he had the last time.

Miss Hadford exited the room first. Upon seeing him in the passageway, she stumbled to a halt.

“L-Lord Dunsbourne.” She curtsied.

“Good afternoon, Miss Hadford,” he said.

Emily followed Miss Hadford out of the bedchamber and smiled at him. “Miss Selfridge just left.”

Adam nodded. “I saw her go downstairs with an enormous turquoise cloud in her wake.”

“She is going to use Mother’s silk to make me a whole new gown.”

Emily’s face shone. Adam could not recall the last time he had seen her so joyful. If nothing more, he owed Miss Hadford his gratitude for that.

“I am happy to hear it.” He turned to his sister’s guest. “It seems that you are overdue my thanks and my apology, Miss Hadford.”

“For what, my lord?” She appeared genuinely mystified.

“My thanks for the assistance you have given to my sister these past two days. It may not come as a great surprise to learn that I know almost nothing about ordering gowns. Without your input, I fear my desire to procure some for Emily would have gone very badly.” He hazarded a rueful smile and was rewarded with a slight uptick of the corners of Miss Hadford’s lips. “My apology is for my terse response to the inquiry you made yesterday regarding my work. It was not my intent to be discourteous, although in retrospect, I may have come across as such.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught Emily’s pleased expression, but his attention was on Miss Hadford. If the shock in her blue eyes was any indication, she had not anticipated his honest admission.

“Thank you, my lord. Spending time with Emily has been a pleasure.

If my presence has also been helpful, I am twice glad. As for your apology, it was not expected, but I accept it nonetheless.”

Adam was unprepared for the relief he felt at her words. “Thank you, Miss Hadford.” He hesitated. “If you remain curious as to what I have been doing in the orchard, perhaps you would care for a brief tour?”

“I . . . well . . . that is to say . . .” Myriad emotions flitted across her face, each one disappearing before Adam could fully identify it. She cleared her throat softly and tried her response again. “I should be happy to view your work, my lord.”

“Very well.” His pleasure mingled uncomfortably with apprehension. Although he had spoken of his plans for the orchard and cider production at the Palmers’ dinner, this would be the first time he had shown anyone the progress he had made. “What of you, Emily? Would you like to see what Henry and I have been about all these weeks?”

“Very much,” she said. “May we go right away?”

Adam raised an inquiring eyebrow at Miss Hadford. She gave a brief nod.

“Right away, it is,” he said, offering their guest his arm.

He sensed rather than saw her hesitation, but before he could retract his arm, she took it. And then all he could feel was the warmth of her hand. It penetrated his sleeve, spreading up his arm to his chest. His pulse quickened even as confusion swirled. He had escorted countless young ladies in to dinner and onto ballroom floors, but never before had he experienced a response such as this. He took a steadying breath and attempted to gather his wits. Polite conversation over a short walk. Regardless of his lack of practice, surely he could manage that much.

Chapter 8

WHAT HAD HAPPENED TO THE aloof, enigmatic Lord Dunsbourne? Phoebe had not particularly liked the gentleman, but given the choice, she would choose him over the man presently escorting her out of Dunsbourne Manor. The former was safer.

It had been all too easy to label that Lord Dunsbourne an unprincipled gambler and a forbidding older brother. It was considerably more difficult to do so with the charming, handsome man currently walking along the gravel path that circuted the large house. And yet, she must. Somehow, she had to look past the unexpected pleasure of this moment and remember that the late Lord Dunsbourne's death had been caused by this very gentleman's reprobate actions and that Emily had scarcely been allowed outside the manor since then.

They followed the path past a wide lawn and flower garden. She spotted an inviting bench positioned beneath an ancient sycamore on their left, and a little farther along, the stables appeared on their right. A meadowlark sang somewhere nearby, but it was the only thing that broke the silence until they came upon a solid line of trees.

"You have pruned the branches. The mad tangle is gone," Emily said. At Emily's look of wonder, Lord Dunsbourne chuckled. "It truly has been some time since you visited this part of the grounds."

She nodded. "Miss Glover disapproves of young ladies climbing trees, and ever since I was stung by a bee whilst walking through the orchard, she has refused to come this way. Between the flowers in the spring and the dropped fruit in the autumn, there were always too many buzzing insects for her peace of mind."

"You do not need to have Miss Glover with you to come here, Em. You are welcome anytime. And if I have my way, there will be no fruit wasting away on the ground this year."

Had Lord Dunsbourne just given Emily an open invitation to explore the orchards and the work being done here? Was that level of freedom a new development? Phoebe glanced at her friend. Emily appeared pleased.

"I will come more often. If only to close my eyes and smell the apples."

Lord Dunsbourne grinned. "It is marvelous, isn't it? And the scent will only become stronger as we begin to harvest and crush the fruit."

They entered the orchard. Row upon tidy row of trees, as far as the eye could see, were laden with apples.

"Good heavens." Phoebe removed her hand from Lord Dunsbourne's arm and approached the nearest tree. Tipping her head back until her bonnet touched her shoulders, she gazed at the innumerable red and green orbs hidden amongst the thick foliage.

“Those are King of the Pippins,” Lord Dunsbourne said. He reached out and plucked one from the lowest branch and gave it to her. “They are sweet to the taste already, but the flavor will improve further in the next couple of weeks.”

Phoebe rolled the apple in her gloved hands, marveling at its unusually large size. If this specimen were any indication, the baron’s crop would be substantial. “How ever will you harvest so many?”

“I intend to bring on extra workers when the time comes,” he said.

“And they will have to work long, hard days.”

“Longer and harder than yours was yesterday?” Phoebe asked.

He had the grace to look uncomfortable. “I daresay.”

She bit back a smile. “What happens to the apples after they are picked?”

“Come,” he said. “I will show you.”

Phoebe and Emily followed Lord Dunsbourne through the trees until they reached a large building that resembled a stable. The wide doors were open, and the rumble of men’s voices echoed from within.

“This is the old cart shed,” Lord Dunsbourne said. “Given that we don’t have as many vehicles as we used to, I have converted half the building into an apple mill. When the apples are first picked, they’re gathered in tumps at the edge of the orchard. The mounds of fruit are covered with straw and left to sit for between one and three weeks. That allows the sugars in the apples to become more concentrated and makes for a sweeter juice. Afterward, we load the apples into the mill, where they are crushed to extract the liquid.”

“Adam just purchased a new mill,” Emily said.

“It had to be done. If the Dunsbourne orchards are to be successful, we must have the capability to crush all the fruit before it rots.”

“And you most certainly have a great deal of fruit,” Phoebe said.

“This year’s harvest looks to be our biggest yet.”

He led her through the open doorway, and Phoebe stared in amazement. Two entire walls were lined with barrels stacked three deep. An assortment of boxes and unfamiliar equipment had been gathered in the far corner, and in the center of the shed, there was an enormous stone circle with a second stone shaped like a wide wheel atop it. Sturdy wooden posts connected the various parts of what must be the mill, and attached to a harness suspended from one of the posts was a black-and-white plow horse. The enormous animal snorted and sniffed the air before turning her doleful eyes upon the newcomers.

“Excuse me, ladies.” Lord Dunsbourne left Phoebe and Emily at the shed’s entrance and approached the two men standing beside the horse. “Is Molly giving you trouble again, Oliver?”

“Aye, m’ lord.” The sandy-haired man scratched his head, a worried expression on his face. “I don’ know what gets into ’er. She’ll be

movin' along at a good pace, then all of a sudden, she comes to a full stop. After that, there's no shiftin' 'er unless she decides it's a good idea—which don't 'appen all that often." He looked grim. "I've not used the whip yet. But somehow, I've got t' make her understand that operatin' this mill is 'er sole reason fer bein' 'ere."

As though she knew she had misbehaved, the plow horse hung her head.

Phoebe watched her for a moment before entering the shed and approaching her slowly. "How old is she?"

"We were told she was ten years old." Lord Dunsbourne ran his hand across the horse's strong shoulders, his frown reminiscent of the temperament she had witnessed the day before.

The sandy-haired man appeared equally unhappy. "By 'er teeth, I'd say that was about right. But I'm startin' to think we've been fooled. She's actin' like she's older."

"Miss Hadford, this is my groom, Oliver," Lord Dunsbourne said. "And beside him is Henry, my gardener. The stubborn plow horse is Molly. She is in training for operating the apple mill."

"Pleased to meet you, miss." Oliver inclined his head, and the weatherworn older man echoed the greeting.

"Molly looks weary." Phoebe extended her hand, and the horse lifted her head, her nostrils twitching. Within seconds, the mare's attention diverted to Phoebe's other hand—the one holding the apple Lord Dunsbourne had given her. The horse snorted, pulling against her harness. "Oh, so you want me to share, do you?" Phoebe chuckled softly. After her sister, Jane's, debilitating fall from a horse, her father had filled their stables with older mounts in an attempt to prevent any more accidents involving a spirited animal. Phoebe was well used to coaxing fatigued horses. "I fear you will have to do something for an apple such as this, old girl."

Holding the apple within plain sight, Phoebe slowly started walking the plow horse's path around the mill. Molly tossed her head, and the harness jingled.

"Come on, Molly. The first part is the hardest. Once you get started, the apple is yours."

The horse took one step and then another. She strained against the weight of the millstone, and the leather harness creaked. With a growl, the stone began to roll.

"Well, I'll be. We 'ave an orchard full of 'em, and I've never tried temptin' her with apples afore." Oliver scratched his head again. "I suppose I'm willin' to clean her mouth bit if she's willin' to keep walkin' after she's eaten."

Phoebe continued moving until the horse's stride was steady and the millstone was moving smoothly. Then she slowed her pace and

allowed Molly to claim the apple. The mare guzzled it down instantly, and when it was gone, she kept on walking.

“I recommend the King of the Pippins, Oliver,” Phoebe said, stepping away from the mill so Molly could make another circuit.

The groom grinned. “Right you are, miss.”

Adam watched the Hadford carriage disappear down the drive. He stood in exactly the same spot he had the day before. This time, however, his hand had been clean enough to assist Miss Hadford into the conveyance, and she had smiled at him. Those two things should not have made a huge difference to the parting of relatively new acquaintances. And yet they had.

His thoughts tumbled over the events of the afternoon. From Miss Hadford's gracious acceptance of his apology to her genuine interest in seeing the orchard and mill, nothing had gone as he had anticipated. He was still trying to reconcile the young lady who dressed so exquisitely as to turn heads when she entered a room with the one who paid no heed to the dirt and straw clinging to her hem whilst she coaxed an old, tired plow horse into action.

It was as though two totally different personas existed under the same name. Miss Hadford had spoken to Oliver and Henry as naturally and pleasantly as she had to Lord Forsnes and Mr. Webb. The interaction he had overheard between her and Emily in the house had been warm and uplifting, and yet he would be willing to bet his first barrel of cider that her conversation with Miss Webb and Miss Chapman at the Palmers' event had been a typical female gossip session.

He took an uneasy breath. His family had suffered enough because one man had not been who he seemed. It could not happen again. Miss Glover saw Miss Hadford as a threat to Emily's well-being; Emily already considered her a dear friend. Somehow, he must uncover the young lady's true identity. And he must do it soon. He would not risk Emily's being hurt by another's duplicity.

As though she sensed that his thoughts had turned to her, Emily slipped her arm through his. "Thank you, Adam."

"Thank you?"

She nodded, smiling at him. "You redeemed yourself handsomely today."

"I did, did I?" He pushed his troubled thoughts aside and quirked an eyebrow. "Even though Miss Hadford left the cart shed with Molly's slobber all over her pristine white gloves?"

Emily laughed. "Yes. Even then."

"I am most relieved." He guided her back toward the house. "It was a close thing, you know. I knew that a walk through the orchard and the cart shed could not possibly measure up to choosing new gowns."

"I enjoyed the tour," Emily said earnestly. "And I believe Phoebe did too. You need not worry if she enjoyed discussing gowns more than milling apples; she seemed quite content when she left."

Adam chuckled. "You are priceless, Emily. Do not ever change."

She gave him a quizzical look, but when he refused to elaborate she heaved a dramatic sigh. "I had such high hopes for growing another

couple of inches. But if you say I am not to change—”
“Absolutely not. Neither of your new gowns would fit if you did that.”
Emily laughed. “Very well. You win. I am sufficiently excited about them to accept my current height—at least for the time being.”
“I am glad to hear it.”

They entered the hall, and after Thompson had relieved her of her bonnet and gloves, Emily stood on tiptoes and brushed her lips to Adam’s cheek.

“It has been a lovely afternoon. Thank you again for your part in it,” she said, and then she hurried across the tiled floor and up the stairs. Adam stood, watching her go. She was so slightly built, it was no wonder he still thought of her as a little girl. Although, he could not deny that today, whilst she’d been in Miss Hadford’s company, he had finally seen her as the young woman she had become: beautiful, poised, and desperately in need of more than he and Miss Glover could offer. With a sigh, he turned away and walked into his study. Thompson had left today’s correspondence on the desk for him. Adam moved closer, instantly recognizing Toole’s handwriting on the letter at the top of the pile. His pulse quickened. What did the Bow Street runner have to report? Taking his seat behind the desk, Adam broke the seal and began to read.

Bow Street, London

13 September 1788

Dear Lord Dunsbourne,

I write to inform you that there is strong reason to believe that Mr. Freddie Payne has returned from parts unknown and is currently residing within the city of London.

The series of events that have led to this conclusion are as follows:

Over the course of the last two weeks, an increased number of forged notes, ranging in value from fifty pounds to five pounds, have begun circulating the city.

My contacts claim that the forgeries are of the uniquely high standard previously attributed to Mr. Payne.

A grocery shop assistant has shared a full description of the gentleman who passed him counterfeit notes. Along with general information regarding the perpetrator’s height and clothing was the note that his eyes were an unusual shade of gray.

Please be assured, the hunt to bring Freddie Payne to justice continues. Should I learn anything more substantive over the course of the next few weeks, I shall inform you directly.

Sincerely,

Hugh Toole

Adam sat back in his chair, his breath releasing in a whoosh. As little as two weeks ago, if he had received a letter such as this, he would have been on his way to London within the hour. Even now, despite the personal pledge he had made to actively pursue his nemesis no longer, an inner demon urged him on. To go now. Before Payne knew the authorities were on to him. And before the fiend could infiltrate and destroy any more lives.

He jumped to his feet and paced to the book-lined wall and back. No. He could not go. There was the imminent harvest to consider. The livelihood of his entire household was dependent upon it. And then there was Emily. She had taken her first step into Society. There was no retracting that now. He had set a new course; he must stick to it. Toole was a good man and an excellent runner. If anyone could catch Payne, it would be him. It was time to start trusting someone other than himself.

Dropping back into his seat, Adam pulled out a fresh piece of paper. He stared at it for a moment, then straightening his shoulders, he took up his quill and began to write.

Dunsbourne Manor

16 September 1788

Dear Mr. Toole,

I am most appreciative of your update on the whereabouts and recent activity of Freddie Payne. It comes as no surprise that the villain has resumed his nefarious work in London. We both knew it was simply a matter of time before he resurfaced.

As you may know, I made a trip to London at the first of the month to meet with Mr. Erasmus Dobbs, a hosier who was tricked by Payne whilst Payne was in his employ. The information Mr. Dobbs shared corroborated much of what we already knew about the man but, unfortunately, included nothing new.

Since returning to Dunsbourne Manor, it has been necessary to turn my attention to the affairs of my family and estate, which means that I am not in a position to venture to the city for the foreseeable future.

Should any of the gentlemen I have interviewed in the past contact me with regard to Payne, I shall inform you immediately. I would ask that you do me the same courtesy should there be any further developments that might lead to Payne's capture.

Yours sincerely,

Dunsbourne

The moment the ink was dry, Adam folded the letter and sealed it. Taking it in his hand, he rose to his feet and crossed the room, then stood before the fireplace and looked up at the painting of his father hanging above the mantelpiece.

“Forgive me, Father.” His grip on the letter tightened as he spoke.

“For Emily’s sake, I must stay at Dunsbourne Manor. But I swear to you, justice will be served. If Toole is unsuccessful in capturing Payne this time, I will resume the hunt myself.”

Chapter 9

IT HAD BEEN A WEEK since Phoebe's visit to Dunsbourne Manor. Seven days since she'd had cause to question everything she knew about Lord Dunsbourne. And seven days of wondering why she felt so driven to learn the truth. She had tried every distraction she could conceive of, but none had worked sufficiently well to bring her relief.

Lord Dunsbourne's pleasant disposition the day she had met with Emily and Miss Selfridge had caught her completely off guard. It was almost impossible to reconcile the gentleman who had taken the time to show her a project so close to his heart with the one who had been so short with her the day before. Similarly, the stories Marianne and Georgiana had shared of a hardened gambler who had cruelly misused his father and sister did not fit with the brother Emily interacted with so cheerfully.

It was a torturous puzzle. Phoebe's convictions had swung back and forth between the opposing realities so often as to make her head ache. But just when she had decided that she would rather stomp through the puddles in the rain outside than feign interest in her stitchery a minute longer, their butler, Gresham, entered the drawing room to announce that they had visitors.

"Mr. Derrick Webb and Miss Marianne Webb," Gresham said, executing a small bow as Marianne swished into the drawing room in a swirl of purple skirts, her brother close behind.

Phoebe's mother set aside the book she'd been reading and rose to her feet at the same time as Phoebe. "Good afternoon, Mr. Webb. Miss Webb."

"And to you, Mrs. Hadford." Mr. Webb inclined his head politely, and Marianne bobbed a brief curtsy.

Phoebe did little to hide her enthusiasm at the unexpected interruption. This was exactly what she needed. "How lovely to see you."

Marianne beamed. "We are come to deliver an invitation."

"Please, take a seat," her mother said. "I shall ring for tea." She pulled the bell and resumed her place beside the fire.

Mr. Webb took the chair across from her.

Marianne sat beside Phoebe on the sofa and opened her reticule to withdraw a card. "You see," she said, handing it to Phoebe with giddy delight. "We are having a ball. Mother decided that it has been far too long since there was a dance held at Banbury Hall, so she is hosting one a week on Saturday."

"Well, that is big news." Phoebe's mother looked almost as pleased as Marianne. "Do you not think so, Phoebe?"

Startled, Phoebe looked up from reading the invitation. "Yes, indeed.

It is very exciting.”

Her mother looked at her oddly, and Phoebe realized her mistake. She had been so focused on whether there would be time enough for Miss Selfridge to complete Emily’s gowns by then, she had neglected to show sufficient excitement over the event. She attempted to rectify the error with a wide smile. “Everyone in the county will be talking of little else until then.”

Marianne gave a happy sigh. “I know I shall not. It will be the grandest affair we’ve held at Banbury Hall for years.”

“Do you expect a large crowd, then?” her mother asked.

“If the number of invitations going out is any indication, it will be a crush worthy of the best London ballrooms,” Mr. Webb said. He turned a charming smile on Phoebe. “In fact, Miss Hadford, if I may be so bold, I shall ask you now if you would do me the honor of the first dance. I would hate to be bested by another simply because I do not cross the ballroom in time.”

Warmth filled Phoebe’s cheeks. Her mother looked inordinately pleased.

“I should be delighted,” Phoebe said.

Mr. Webb’s self-assured smile bordered on smugness, and Phoebe suppressed a shudder. She had not told the truth. Dancing with Mr. Webb would be far from delightful, but thankfully, it was only one dance. She could manage one dance. The gentleman thought so highly of himself it was unlikely that he would believe any young lady would feel otherwise.

She turned to Marianne. “Surely you are not hand-delivering all the invitations?”

Marianne laughed. “Oh no. We had thought to do our closest neighbors, but even that is not possible.” She leaned a little closer. “I would not wish to enter Dunsbourne Manor, for example.”

“Whyever not? Miss Norton would undoubtedly welcome you warmly.”

Marianne’s hazel eyes widened. “That may be, but Lord Dunsbourne might prevent me from ever leaving again.”

“I think that highly unlikely. Particularly if Mr. Webb accompanied you.” Mr. Webb sat up a little taller and straightened his cravat a fraction. Irritated that she had said something he had construed as a compliment, Phoebe tried a different tack. “I believe Lord Dunsbourne works long hours in his orchard. I daresay you could come and go at the manor without ever seeing him.”

Mr. Webb snorted. “Surely you do not believe what the baron said at the Palmers’ dinner, Miss Hadford. If the gentleman is working his land at all, it is to further his gambling addiction.”

“Mr. Webb.” Her mother’s shocked voice reminded Phoebe that her

mother had not been privy to the whispers she had heard that night. “Forgive me, Mrs. Hadford,” Mr. Webb said. “I did not mean to offend. It is simply that Lord Dunsbourne’s reputation cannot be ignored. He and his sister will be invited to the ball—his position in Society demands it—but I, for one, will not be heartbroken if he chooses to stay away.”

“I, on the other hand, will be sorry if they do.” Phoebe met Mr. Webb’s dumbfounded expression without flinching. “No matter Lord Dunsbourne’s faults, his sister deserves no censure. I hope she attends. It will undoubtedly be a marvelous affair, and it would be a shame for Miss Norton to miss it.”

There was a moment of complete silence. Phoebe glanced at her mother. Her mouth was agape. She closed it abruptly and gave Phoebe a look that Phoebe knew all too well. A lecture was in her future. One that involved a review of correct etiquette and ladylike behavior. Behind her, the door opened, and one of the footmen walked in bearing a tea tray.

“Ah, wonderful. Here is the tea.” Her mother’s voice rang with relief. Serving tea to her guests would place her safely back in control of the situation.

“Would you care for milk or sugar, Miss Webb?”

“A little of both, if you please.”

Her mother poured. The familiar clink of teaspoons against china filled the room. Phoebe leaned forward and took the cup and saucer from her mother’s outstretched hand and passed it to Marianne. The young lady accepted it with a small smile. Their eyes met. Phoebe did not miss the confusion evident there, but now was not the time to try to explain—especially as she did not fully understand why she felt the need to stand up for Emily.

Once tea and biscuits were handed out, the conversation started anew. A discussion of the weather, Mrs. Palmer’s prize chrysanthemums, and Lord Forsnes’s newly purchased stallion were all blissfully safe topics. Phoebe had never known her mother to be so fascinated by a horse’s pedigree, but Mr. Webb was more than happy to supply her with every detail.

Only when the subject of fox hunting was completely exhausted did Mr. Webb finally set down his teacup.

“My compliments to your cook, Mrs. Hadford. The tea and biscuits were delicious.”

“Yes, indeed,” Marianne chimed in. Her cup had been empty for some time. “But I fear we should be on our way.”

Mr. Webb came to his feet. The women followed.

“Thank you for coming,” Phoebe said. “And for bringing the invitation to the ball. We shall all look forward to it very much.”

The reminder brought a smile to Marianne's face. "It promises to be quite marvelous."

"Indeed," Phoebe's mother said.

Mr. Webb bowed, his gaze lingering on Phoebe a few seconds longer than was comfortable.

"Good day, Mr. Webb," she said.

"Good day, Miss Hadford," he replied. "I shall look for you at the start of the ball."

Still standing, Phoebe watched the Webb siblings leave the room. Her mother remained silent until they heard Gresham's voice wish their guests good day in the hall and the thud of the front door pronounce their departure from the house.

"Well." Her mother lowered herself into the nearest chair. "I hope you have a worthy explanation for your behavior this afternoon, young lady."

"My behavior was above reproach, Mother. I do not think it remiss of me to disagree with Mr. Webb's opinion on a matter, particularly if he is in the wrong."

"In the wrong! Good heavens, child. What can you possibly know about Lord Dunsbourne and his sister that Mr. Webb does not?"

Phoebe was willing to guess that she could generate a fairly extensive list, but that would do nothing to placate her mother. Experience had taught her that it was best to give her mother time to say her piece.

"I cannot begin to imagine what came over you. Especially after Mr. Webb did you the honor of asking for the first dance at the ball. To contradict him so vehemently . . ." She moaned. "What must he think of you?"

If her defense of Emily had caused Mr. Webb to think any less of her, Phoebe would have to thank her new friend profusely. The gentleman was well groomed and well mannered, but every time he looked at her, she fought the urge to squirm. She had no desire whatsoever to win any further admiration or affection.

"I am sorry if I caused you distress, Mother, but I am not sorry for what I said. I have spent time with Miss Norton and consider her a friend. She does not deserve to be shunned because people think ill of her brother."

"Like it or not, it is impossible to fully remove the stigma associated with disreputable family connections."

"But Miss Norton has done nothing." Phoebe clenched her fists.

"Besides, we are basing our opinion of Lord Dunsbourne on nothing more than gossip."

"What Lord Dunsbourne did or did not do before our time at Charwell Park is irrelevant. If Society has placed a blemish on his character, your personal opinion of the baron will have little or no bearing

whatsoever.” Her mother eyed her worriedly. “Mr. Webb has singled you out. Do not jeopardize his good opinion over something so wholly out of your control. As women, our role is to excel within the bounds Society sets, not push through them.”

Phoebe’s chest hurt. Had she truly allowed herself to become so completely subservient to societal protocols? She had always enjoyed mingling in Society. Attending parties and dances had been her time to shine. But perhaps it had come at too high a cost. Did any one of her acquaintances see the thinking, caring individual inside the pretty gowns, or had that individual become lost in the colorful whirl of Society life?

“Thank you, Mother.” Her voice was low. “You have given me a great deal to think about.”

Her mother nodded. “I daresay our guests will put today’s incident behind them soon enough.” She sighed happily. “And if it hasn’t happened before the ball, it most certainly will once Mr. Webb catches sight of you.”

Phoebe took her seat and picked up her needlework. Lowering her head to hide her tear-filled eyes, she began to mindlessly unpick the last few stitches. For the first time in her life, she wished that her appearance were a little plainer and her wardrobe a little simpler. Perhaps then, someone would look past the outer trappings to see the person she was within.

She continued unpicking embroidered daisies until she had her emotions under control. If the rain would only abate, she could go outside. A brisk walk or a ride across the hills would do much to help her regain her equilibrium. As it was, she was trapped in the house. Jane was gone, and her father . . . Still holding the needle, Phoebe’s hand hovered over the fabric. Although she had yet to see him, her father had returned from London the night before.

A quick glance at her mother told Phoebe that she had resumed her reading and appeared engrossed. Setting her needlework on the sofa, Phoebe got to her feet and slipped out of the room. She walked down the passageway toward her father’s study. The door was closed. She hesitated. Would he be irritated by an interruption? She knew full well that after having been gone for over a week, he would have much work to catch up on, but she could not deny her overwhelming desire for his steadying presence. Now. While her thoughts were so conflicted.

Raising her hand, she knocked.

“Enter,” her father called from within.

Phoebe opened the door but remained on the threshold. “Welcome home, Father.”

He looked up from the large ledger book on the desk and smiled.

“Thank you, my dear. Your Aunt Millward treats me very well when I stay with her in Town, but it is nice to be back. She sends you her love, by the way.”

Phoebe acknowledged the message with a smile of her own. “I am sure Aunt Millward enjoys having you visit. She thrives upon fussing over her guests.”

He chuckled. “I believe you are right.”

Phoebe paused, wondering how best to continue.

Her father caught her hesitation. “Is there something I can help you with?”

“I think so.” She grasped the doorknob more tightly. “Or rather, I hope so.”

He set down his quill and gave her his full attention. “Come in and sit down.”

Closing the door behind her, Phoebe crossed the room and took the chair on the other side of his desk. “I do not wish to take too much of your time.”

“These books will still be here later today, tomorrow, and next week. I am quite content to take a break from them for a little while.”

She nodded and smoothed out her gown, hoping the sweat on her hands would not leave marks. If she could conjure up a subtle way of introducing her subject, she would. As it was, it was probably best that she jump right in.

“Does what I think really matter?”

Her father looked startled. “Most certainly.”

“Even if no one around me ascribes to the same opinion?”

“Am I to assume we are discussing something more important than everyone at a dinner party enjoying mushrooms whilst you despise them?”

She managed a weak smile. “Yes.”

“If you are quite sure that your stance is grounded in truth, then I would hope that you are never called upon to abandon the notion.”

He shrugged. “I realize that it is far easier for a man to act upon his impressions than it is for a woman, but it is hard for me to believe that if I had fathered a son, he would be any more sensible or kindhearted than you, my dear.”

Gratitude brought a lump to Phoebe’s throat. Her father’s affirmation meant all the more because it was wholly unconnected to her appearance.

“Thank you, Father. That means a great deal.”

He smiled kindly. “Sometimes, when our social circle is limited, it can be challenging to find like-minded people, but if we are willing to increase our acquaintances sufficiently, we often find those who think as we do.”

Phoebe pondered that thought. The neighbors they had met since arriving in Berkshire had been most welcoming, but they were a relatively close-knit group. Other than Emily, Marianne and Georgiana were the only young ladies close to her age. Who was to say that Marianne's and Georgiana's opinions should carry more weight than her own simply because they were of similar minds?

She and her mother shared a love for beautiful gowns and social gatherings, but they deviated in the value they placed on social standing and the estimation of others. Was she, perhaps, more like her father in the way she considered those things? And if so, might he perhaps be in a position to help with her current quandary?

"May I ask your impression of Lord Dunsbourne?" she asked.

Her father blinked with surprise at the sudden change in subject.

"Lord Dunsbourne? I hardly know the man."

"I realize that," Phoebe said. "And perhaps it is unfair of me to ask, but I should like to hear your initial opinion of the gentleman, if you are willing to give it."

Her father frowned. "Has the baron done anything to make you question his character?"

"Nothing that I can personally attest to. But . . . but I have heard rumors." Phoebe clasped her hands. This was harder than she had thought it would be. "If the rumors are true, his past deeds are as despicable as they are disreputable."

"I am sorry to hear it. But surely, if he keeps to himself as he has in the past, those rumors should have little impact upon you." He eyed her sternly. "Unless you intend to propagate them."

"I hope you know me better than that, Father. I saw how whispered words affected Jane. No one deserves to unjustly suffer in that way. If a wrong has been committed, I would rather have it out in the open than have it hiss around a room like a poisonous snake."

"I am glad to hear it. If that is the case, however, I would have thought you could ignore whatever you may hear about Lord Dunsbourne without it causing you any further concern."

His words were dishearteningly similar to her mother's.

"Under normal circumstances, I would agree," she said. "But I have struck up a friendship with his younger sister. She is very sweet and a delight to be with."

"When we met her at the Palmers' house, she seemed quite amiable—albeit, rather oddly dressed."

Phoebe smothered a smile. "Yes. She reached out to me to ask for my assistance with her wardrobe."

"Then I shall add astute to the list of qualities she possesses."

"Was that a rather odd sort of compliment that extended to both Miss Norton and me?" Phoebe asked.

Her father's eyes twinkled. "Take it as you will, my dear." She shifted in her chair. "When Miss Webb and Miss Chapman first saw Lord Dunsbourne at the Palmers' gathering, they shared with me information regarding the baron's past—some of which was most alarming. At the time, I considered the information to be credible, given that both ladies have known the family their entire lives." She paused, wondering how much she should say. "Some of their allegations regarded the baron's poor treatment of his sister. And I confess, when Miss Norton invited me to Dunsbourne Manor to help her select new gowns, my first thought was that perhaps I might be the means of freeing her from the baron's tyrannical rule. Now, however, I am not so sure that she wishes anything different than the situation in which she finds herself. She seems quite happy at home." "Have you formed a different opinion of the baron also?"

Phoebe shrugged helplessly. "I saw him for a short time after Miss Norton's appointment with the seamstress. He seemed perfectly agreeable. Certainly not the oppressor that Miss Webb and Miss Chapman painted him to be." She leaned forward in her seat. "But perhaps that is a façade he employs for all guests. Perhaps he truly is keeping Miss Norton indoors against her will. There have been hints of it. But how am I to know for sure? And how do I determine the way I should act?"

Her father steepled his fingers. "What does your heart tell you, Phoebe?"

She squirmed. She did not wish to listen to her heart. Not when it had betrayed her so soundly when she'd placed her hand on Lord Dunsbourne's arm. And especially not when her head was echoing Marianne's and Georgiana's accusations so loudly.

"That there may be more good in him than I previously believed," she finally admitted.

Her father nodded. "You asked for my impression of the baron, so I shall give it. Notwithstanding the fact that he is a titled young man, he affected no airs or graces. He maintained polite conversation with old and new acquaintances alike. His manner was polite but wary—until he began speaking of his cider production. At that point, he allowed his passion for the project to show."

"Which is why you offered to purchase a barrel," Phoebe guessed.

He nodded. "There are two things I have learned during the many years I have been doing business. First, if there is no passion for a new venture, it is instantly sunk, and second, if you expect the best of others, it usually pays dividends. People may let you down occasionally, but they are equally likely to rise to whatever level of trust you place in them.

"I may not have the answers you seek with regard to Miss Norton or

her brother, Phoebe, but with thoughtful and careful consideration, I would surmise that you will find them on your own soon enough.”

Chapter 10

A BALL. ADAM'S STOMACH SANK. A small dinner party had been trying enough for Emily. However would she manage a ball? He lowered the Webbs' invitation to his desk as another alarming thought struck. Did Emily even know how to dance? He had left all facets of his sister's education to Miss Glover, but she had never once requested the services of a dance instructor. Did that mean that she had taught Emily the rudimentary steps herself, or were his sister's skills completely lacking in that vital area? He released a frustrated breath. The cost of neglecting his sister was catching up to him at an alarming rate.

For one long minute, Adam considered discarding the invitation. It was by far the easiest course to take. But the uncomfortable pricking of his conscience would not be silenced. He had committed to this path, and he would see it through. With the invitation in hand, he rose to his feet and walked out of the study in search of his sister. He found her in the drawing room with Miss Glover. As per usual, the older lady was knitting. Emily had a large pile of books on the end table at her side, but her attention was currently focused on a knitting project of her own. If the long and horribly uneven length of blue knit wool hanging off her needles was any indication, he was to be gifted another homemade scarf in the near future. The last one had been brown and had been so long, he had been forced to wrap it around his neck three times to save it from touching his knees. Perhaps that one could be passed along to Henry when he was required to wear the blue one.

"Good afternoon, ladies," he said.

Both women looked up.

"Adam." Emily hurriedly tucked her knitting out of sight behind a cushion and reached for a piece of paper lying on top of the nearby pile of books. "I received a letter today."

Noting that she wished to keep the knitting project a surprise, he raised the card in his hand. "How extraordinary! So did I."

"That is a daily occurrence for you and, therefore, not worth mentioning. I hardly ever hear from anyone."

Adam acknowledged the fact with a regretful shrug. It was something else he hoped would change as his sister's list of acquaintances and friends grew.

"Very well, then. Who wrote to you today?" he said.

"Miss Selfridge. She says my gowns are close to completion. She wishes to make an appointment to come for a final fitting."

"That is good news. Particularly in light of the invitation we just received." He handed Emily the card and let her read it.

"The Webbs are hosting a ball." She looked up at him with alarm in her eyes. "And they have invited us both?"

"Yes."

"But I cannot. I mean, I . . ." She studied the card again. "Will there be dancing?"

He chuckled. "Dancing is remarkably common at a ball."

Her face paled, and the misgivings Adam had experienced in the study returned with full force.

"Miss Glover," he said, fixing the lady with a stern look. "How competent is my sister in dancing the allemande or the cotillion?"

"The allemande, my lord?"

"Yes, Miss Glover. It is a dance that has been popular in London ballrooms these last twenty years."

Miss Glover sat very still. "She can perform the steps of the minuet quite well, my lord."

The minuet. Heaven help him. That may have been the dance of choice when Miss Glover was young, but other dances were far more popular in current ballrooms. He took a deep breath, willing himself to remain calm. It was as much his fault as Miss Glover's. He should have checked that Emily was receiving the correct instruction.

"Are you familiar with the allemande and cotillion, Miss Glover?"

"I have seen the cotillion performed, my lord, but have not learned to dance it myself."

Her silence regarding the allemande suggested even less knowledge with regard to that complicated dance.

"Adam."

He turned to Emily. Color had yet to reappear in her cheeks.

"I do not wish to be made to feel foolish at the Webbs' ball. I would rather not go."

Adam ran his fingers through his hair. Truth be told, he would also rather avoid the event. But he would likely feel the same way every time an invitation arrived at the house, and that would not help Emily's launch into Society at all. This was something he and Emily needed to conquer together. And conquer it, they would.

"You shall not feel foolish," he said. "Miss Selfridge has said that your new gowns are almost ready. I have no doubt that you will look beautiful."

"But the dances—"

"You shall learn them." Even as he said the words, doubt niggled its way to the fore. It had been five years since he had stepped into a ballroom. Could he teach Emily the steps after all that time?

"Do you think Miss Hadford would be willing to help? I hesitate to ask her for anything more, but she was so kind when I approached her about choosing gowns . . ."

Adam seized upon Emily's trailing thought like a man clutching for a life preserver. Miss Hadford. Not only was she far more practiced in today's dances, but she could also guide Emily through the ladies' steps and positions.

"That is an excellent idea," he said. "I suggest that you write to her immediately."

Emily's expression brightened even as a frown appeared upon Miss Glover's face.

"Are you sure that is wise, my lord?" Miss Glover asked.

Adam's jaw tightened. She may be significantly older than he was and have Emily's best interest at heart, but she was in no position to disapprove of anyone he brought in to help Emily at such short notice. Not only was the elderly lady an employee, but her old-fashioned methods were the primary reason they were in this dilemma.

"Yes, Miss Glover. I am quite sure."

She looked no happier, but she remained silent when Emily rose to her feet.

"I shall write to Miss Hadford straightaway," Emily said.

Adam nodded. "Give your letter to Thompson, and he will ensure that it is delivered promptly."

The sooner Miss Hadford came, the better. It would give Emily longer to practice the dance steps before the ball, and it would enable him to take the lady's measure once and for all. Surely then he could put her out of his mind.

Phoebe clapped her hands in delight. "Oh, Emily, it is lovely!" Emily twirled and the turquoise gown swirled with her. "Do you really think so?"

"Absolutely. No young man will be able to take his eyes off you at the ball."

From her seat across the bedchamber, Miss Glover glowered. Emily's joyful spin stuttered to a stop, and her smile faltered. "Truly?" Phoebe realized her mistake instantly. She stepped forward and took her young friend's hands in hers, squeezing them tightly. "That is nothing to fear, my dear—especially as your brother will be nearby, keeping watch over you." She felt Emily's fingers relax slightly. "It is simply that when a young lady feels beautiful, it is easier for her to hold her head up high. Her confidence shines and attracts the gaze of others." Miss Glover's expression was becoming even more stormy, but Phoebe pushed on. "I would not have you think that I am advocating having pride in one's appearance. Rather, that we strive to push past our own insecurities so that we might help others feel at ease. Sometimes a new gown can enable a lady to find that kind of courage."

"Surely you can know nothing of feeling unsure," Emily said.

Phoebe laughed lightly and lowered her voice to a whisper. "If you believe that is true, my lavender gown must have done the trick at the Palmers' dinner. I was battling all manner of insecurities over meeting a local baron and his sister for the first time."

Emily blinked. "You cannot possibly mean me?"

Phoebe laughed again. This time, her merriment filled the room and caused Emily's puzzled expression to soften to a smile.

"But of course. Those of us born to untitled families can be quite intimidated by those of the nobility." She smiled at Emily's look of astonishment. "You must believe me."

"Well, whether or not it took bravery, I am terribly glad you chose to speak to Adam and me that evening."

Phoebe squeezed Emily's hands once more and then released them. "As am I."

She stepped back a pace to allow Miss Selfridge and her pincushion access to Emily's dress. One or two tucks in the bodice and another half inch on the hem was all it would take to have the gown ready for the Webbs' ball.

Phoebe could not help but believe that Emily's mother would have been pleased by the way her gown had been made over to fit her daughter and embrace today's fashion. She hoped the same could be said for Emily's brother. She clasped her hands together, pushing aside the vision of Lord Dunsbourne's stern but handsome face. It would not do to tell her friend that, if anything, her anxiety over meeting the

baron was higher now than it had been at the Palmers' or that wearing her favorite chintz gown today was having no affect whatsoever on calming those nerves.

She had not expected to receive another invitation to visit the manor so soon. It had been only two days since Mr. Webb had sat in the drawing room at Charwell Park reiterating his unfavorable opinion of the baron, two days since her father had suggested that she make up her own mind regarding the gentleman. Unfortunately, two days was obviously not long enough. Her feelings on the subject of Lord Dunsbourne remained as conflicted as ever.

"That should do it, Miss Norton." Miss Selfridge stepped back to eye the gown's hem from a distance. "I shall have both gowns ready for you by tomorrow afternoon."

"Thank you, Miss Selfridge. Would you be good enough to have them sent to the house?"

"Yes, miss."

The seamstress began helping Emily out of the gown, and Phoebe took a seat across from Miss Glover to wait for her. The elderly lady's knitting needles clacked noisily, but her eyes remained focused on her charge. Perhaps it was Miss Glover, rather than Lord Dunsbourne, who held Emily hostage. The unexpected thought took Phoebe by surprise, and she studied the lady's grim expression more carefully. That she did not approve of Emily's new gowns was obvious. As was her disapprobation of Phoebe. But why was that?

"Where did you spend your formative years, Miss Glover?"

The only sign that the older lady had heard her was a slight hitch in the rhythmic clicking of the knitting needles.

"A small town in Exeter," she said, her gaze remaining on Emily. Phoebe kept her expression placid. Miss Glover's job may have been to teach Miss Norton correct etiquette, but it appeared that she did not adhere to those principles herself. Either that, or she did not consider herself a servant in this house.

"A long way from Berkshire, to be sure. You must miss not being so close to the sea."

"Not at all. Dunsbourne Manor is my home now. I am fully content here."

Having grown up near the coast in Yorkshire, Phoebe defied anyone who had once lived beside the sea to claim that they never wished to be at the shore again. Miss Glover must desire to establish the fixed nature of her position in this house in no uncertain terms.

"I am ready." Emily, dressed in a simple blue day dress once more, approached Phoebe. "Miss Selfridge has said that she will see herself out. If you are still willing to be my dance instructor, shall we reconvene in the ballroom now?"

"In the ballroom? Oh my. This is serious instruction, indeed."

Emily's face fell. "Would you rather do it somewhere else?"

Phoebe stood and tucked her arm through Emily's. She must do better at remembering how sheltered her new friend had been up until now.

"The ballroom would have the perfect floor space, but is there a pianoforte there?"

Emily wrinkled her brow in thought. "I do not go into the room often, but I think not."

"I find that it is easier for me to learn the steps when I practice to music." Phoebe picked up the small bundle of sheet music she had placed on the side table when she'd entered the bedchamber. "I brought some with me. If we play these tunes on the pianoforte, it will not sound exactly like the music of a small orchestra, but I believe it will do well enough to help you find your place in the dances."

"There is a pianoforte in the drawing room. We could begin there."

Phoebe nodded. "And perhaps we could employ a footman . . ." Her voice trailed off as she remembered the scarcity of servants in the house. "If your brother has no objections, perhaps we could push aside a few pieces of furniture to create a small area in which to dance."

"He will not object." Emily was sure.

"Lord Dunsbourne does not like change, Miss Norton." Miss Glover placed her knitting into a carpetbag at her feet and rose from her chair. "I would think carefully before shifting things around."

"Since he wishes me to learn these dances and specifically suggested that Miss Hadford be the one to teach me, I am certain he will approve a temporary alteration to the configuration of the drawing room," Emily said.

Miss Glover's mouth formed a thin line, but she started for the door with her carpetbag in hand. Phoebe watched her go, her mind grappling with two new and somewhat unsettling revelations: Lord Dunsbourne had wished her to return to the manor, and the old governess disliked change far more than her employer did.

Adam tugged at the lace at his sleeve as he hurried down the stairs. The Hadford carriage had been parked outside when he'd returned to the house in his work clothes, and when he'd entered the great hall, he had heard the faint strains of music coming from the direction of the drawing room. A quick word with Thompson had confirmed what he had already guessed: Miss Hadford was here, but Miss Selfridge had recently left.

He had taken the stairs two at a time and, for the first time in years, found himself missing the convenience of a valet. In less than fifteen minutes, he had washed and dressed in clean clothing. All that remained now was to hope his cravat was straight and that there was enough time remaining in Emily's improvised dance lesson to ascertain how well she was picking up the new steps.

He slowed as he approached the room, cocking his head to one side to listen to the voices within.

"You almost have it, Emily." Miss Hadford was speaking. "At this point, the gentleman uses his right hand to receive the lady's left behind her, and then she, with her right hand behind him, receives his left."

"Right behind. Receive his left." Emily paused. "But what about my feet? What are they supposed to be doing?"

Laughter. It had been too long since he'd heard such a warm, happy sound.

"Miss Glover would you mind playing the first line of the second page once more?"

The pianoforte began again. Adam recognized the music well enough to know it was being played extremely poorly. He grimaced as Miss Glover hit a fourth wrong note in a row.

"One, two, three, hop. One, two, three, hop." Miss Hadford's voice continued calmly through the missed notes. "Well done."

"Badly done, rather." Emily's voice held a hint of dejection. "I do not think I will ever get it right."

Adam entered the room. The chairs and tables had been pushed against the wall in haphazard fashion, leaving a third of the room free of obstacles. Miss Glover sat at the pianoforte, her back ramrod straight, her expression equally severe. Miss Hadford looked beautiful. There was no other way to describe her. Her rose-colored gown complemented her figure perfectly and matched the faint hint of pink in her cheeks. Her flaxen hair hung in ringlets around her face, and her blue eyes were currently wide with what he hoped was surprise rather than fear. Emily was the only one who greeted him with a smile—albeit a forlorn one.

"It is no good, Adam. Phoebe has been incredibly patient with me, but my feet do not listen to my head, and my arms are never where they

are supposed to be. The allemande is beyond me.”

“Nonsense.” He offered Emily an encouraging smile. “You cannot make me believe that you are unable to conquer what all those feather-headed young ladies who parade around the London ballrooms have already mastered.”

The moment the words were said, he realized how poorly they might be taken by Miss Hadford.

“Your brother is right, Emily,” she said. “I have seen a great many feather-headed young ladies dancing the allemande.” She raised a challenging eyebrow at him. “There are even some bird-witted gentlemen who manage to complete the dance without stepping on their partner’s toes too many times.”

Adam chuckled. He had deserved that—although the upward quirk of her lips suggested that Miss Hadford was fighting a smile.

“That’s just it, you see.” Emily’s shoulders sagged. “You have both seen this dance performed as it should be done. I, on the other hand, know only what it should not look like.”

“Perhaps, if your brother is willing to be your partner it would help,” Miss Hadford said.

Emily turned to him with hope-filled eyes. “Will you do that, Adam?”

“But of course.” He bowed deeply and held his hand to her. “Would you do me the honor, Miss Norton?”

Emily giggled and took his hand. Miss Hadford smiled. Her blue eyes sparkled, and his breath caught. Tearing his gaze away, he focused on his sister.

“How far have you gone?”

“Far enough to get into a muddle.”

“We have reviewed the basic steps and positions,” Miss Hadford said.

“We were just attempting the crossed allemande and the pas d’allemande when you entered.”

He nodded. “Would you play for us, Miss Glover?”

The older lady began again. Adam took Emily’s hand, and as Miss Hadford counted out the beats, he led Emily through the beginning movements. When they came to the pas d’allemande, Emily passed under his arm and turned the wrong way, careening directly into the cherry end table. Miss Hadford stopped counting, and Miss Glover played a series of incorrect notes before halting her playing completely.

“Forgive me,” Miss Glover said. “I believe I am too tired to continue.”

“You have been invaluable, Miss Glover,” Miss Hadford said.

The older lady did not respond. Neither did she look at Miss Hadford. With a sniff, she stepped away from the pianoforte and went to pick up her carpetbag. Adam frowned. Miss Glover could be cantankerous at times, but she was rarely impolite.

"Are you quite well, Miss Glover?" he asked.

"It is nothing some rest will not cure, my lord."

"Then, by all means, spend the remainder of the afternoon in your rooms."

She nodded. "I believe I shall. Thank you, my lord."

Miss Glover walked out of the room, and Adam waited for Miss Hadford to comment on his disrespectful employee.

Instead, she turned to Emily. "You were doing so well before the table came to be in the way."

"You are too kind. I believe it would be more correct to say that I came to be in the way of the table." Emily sighed. "Reading has taught me that I learn best when I can see whatever it is I am studying. I wish I could visualize the allemande being performed correctly."

"If Miss Hadford is willing, perhaps we can demonstrate for you," Adam said.

Emily perked up immediately. "That would make all the difference. Will you, Phoebe? I can play for you."

"But how will you watch if you are playing?" Miss Hadford said.

Emily grinned. "I practice the pianoforte far more than Miss Glover does, so even if I miss a note because I am looking up, I imagine it will sound more melodious than her renditions."

"What do you say, Miss Hadford?" Adam extended his arm toward her. "It appears that we have a pianist."

The color in Miss Hadford's cheeks deepened. "I would be honored, my lord." She curtsied, and then without meeting his eyes, she placed her hand in his.

Instantly, his pulse quickened. But before he could wonder at the unnerving power of Miss Hadford's touch, Emily struck the opening chord on the pianoforte and the lady shifted to take her position at his side.

Miraculously, over the feel of her hand in his and the scent of roses that accompanied her every move, he remembered the dance. Somehow, he led and turned, stepped and pivoted at all the correct times. And then, before he knew what had happened, Emily was playing the last note. Miss Hadford dropped into another deeper curtsy, and he bowed. He was still holding her hand, and as she rose to stand before him, he finally dared look into her eyes. His own confusion was mirrored there.

"That was marvelous." Behind him, he heard the pianoforte bench shift as Emily pushed it away from the instrument. "I had no idea the allemande could appear so elegant and effortless."

"I believe that was largely Miss Hadford's doing," he said.

"Not at all." Miss Hadford slid her hand free and took a step back.

"Your brother is an excellent dancer. A few more times practicing with

him and you shall be a true proficient.” She took another step, increasing the distance between them.

Out in the hall, the longcase clock chimed the hour, and Miss Hadford started.

“It is late. I . . . I should go,” she said.

“So soon?” Emily said. “But I am far from mastering the dance.”

Miss Hadford continued backing toward the door. “It will come. You understand the rudiments now. Lord Dunsbourne can help with the finer details.”

“Very well.” Emily was obviously disappointed; Adam scarcely knew what he was feeling.

Acknowledging Emily’s disheartened air with a troubled look, Miss Hadford quickly retraced her steps across the room and took her hands. “You can do this, Emily. I know you can. If your brother is willing, will you come to Charwell Park an hour or two before the ball? I promised that Lucy would do your hair for your next social event, and I intend to keep my word. If you have any lingering questions about the allemande then, we will address every one before you step onto the dance floor at Banbury Hall.”

Emily looked to Adam. He shifted uneasily. During his time in London, he had witnessed more than his fair share of cattiness among the young ladies of the ton, but this—this show of unaffected kindness—was new to him. Was Miss Hadford genuine in her warm regard for Emily? Did he dare encourage their friendship, even if it meant Emily may end up hurt by it? He was well aware that his faith in the good intentions of others was severely lacking, but he was beginning to wonder if his wariness had cut him off from valuable positive interactions in the name of protecting him from negative ones.

“Should you like that, Emily?” he asked.

“Very much.”

He nodded. “Then that is what we shall do.”

Emily’s radiant smile was reward enough.

She turned to Miss Hadford. “We shall come.”

“My thanks for your thoughtfulness, Miss Hadford,” he said.

She curtsied. “Until Saturday, then, my lord.”

“Until Saturday,” he repeated with a slight bow.

Then he stood, watching silently as she all but fled from the room.

Chapter 11

FREDDIE WAS HALFWAY DOWN ST. James Street when he spotted a familiar gentleman stepping out of White's. Ducking into the nearest doorway, he watched Toole pause on the outside steps of the gentleman's club to survey the street. Freddie frowned. The presence of the Bow Street runner at White's was less than reassuring. The man had been on Freddie's tail for as long as he could remember. Had the runner caught wind of the fact that he was back in the city?

A hackney appeared around the corner. Toole hurried down the steps to the edge of the pavement and raised his arm to hail the driver. The vehicle rumbled to a halt, and without another glance in Freddie's direction, Toole climbed inside. The driver urged the horse forward and within seconds, the hackney carriage and its occupant disappeared onto King Street.

Freddie stepped out of the shadow of the doorway and briskly crossed the distance to White's. Climbing the steps, he gave the doorman an acknowledging nod and entered the building without looking back. The club was not busy at this time of day. Male voices came from the far corner of the room, where three gentlemen were discussing the latest races at Ascot, but many of the guests were sitting alone, enjoying uninterrupted time to read or enjoy a drink. Freddie surreptitiously glanced at each gentleman as he walked by. He was not looking for anyone in particular, but experience had taught him that an eager conversationalist was only a greeting away. Today, he was after a gentleman who would not take kindly to a Bow Street runner questioning members of the elite gentleman's club.

Freddie recognized Bertrand as soon as the gentleman lowered his newspaper to reach for the glass on the nearby table. Satisfaction brought a smile to Freddie's lips. He had found his man.

"Good day, Lord Bertrand," he said, stopping opposite the viscount's chair.

The gentleman looked up with surprise. "Wilmott. What brings you here at this time of day?"

"Just passing by on my way to see my solicitor," Freddie lied. "I cannot stay long, but it's always refreshing to step away from the outside world for a bit, wouldn't you agree?"

"Absolutely, old fellow. Although, it sometimes has an unfortunate way of following one in." He shook his head. "It's a disgrace, if you ask me. What is the point of having a doorman if he lets in any old riffraff?"

Freddie raised a concerned eyebrow. "Have there been some undesirables at White's today?"

"A Bow Street runner." The viscount spoke the words with as much

distaste as a carpenter would use to describe a woodworm.

“Dear me.” Freddie pointed to the chair opposite Bertrand. “May I?”

“Be my guest.”

Freddie sat down. “What did the runner want? I assume he had a reason for his visit.”

“Some nonsense about a young lady being compromised by a gentleman last night in the Tower Bridge area. She claimed his carriage bore a crest but could not identify it fully in the dark.”

Relief surged through Freddie. A crime such as that had nothing whatsoever to do with forged bank notes. Relaxing in the comfortable chair, he clucked his tongue in disapproval. “I daresay the runner has his work cut out for him.”

“Indeed. I don’t envy the fellow. The lady’s family must be behind it, of course, but he wouldn’t drop any names.” Bertrand grunted. “Not that it matters. I have no doubt the scandal will be all the news at the next social gathering.”

“Well, what do we gentlemen live for but to provide employment for Bow Street runners and fuel for Society tabbies, eh?”

Bertrand guffawed. “I like your wit, Wilmott. Let me buy you a drink.”

“That’s very good of you.”

“Nonsense. Glad to do it.” The viscount turned to catch the attention of a nearby member of staff, and with a smirk, Freddie sank deeper into his chair. Toole may be a celebrated lawman, but he was far from infallible. He had not caught Freddie yet, and if Freddie kept his wits about him, the chances were excellent that he never would.

Emily would be here any moment. And she would not come alone. Phoebe paced across her bedchamber. She glanced out of the window before turning to complete her circuit back to the fireplace. Never before had a gentleman so fully rattled her defenses. It had been a week since she had danced with Lord Dunsbourne in the manor's drawing room, and she could still feel the pressure of his fingers on hers.

Every movement of the allemande had passed in a blur, and when his eyes had met hers at its conclusion . . . She pressed her hand to her stomach at the memory. She had known she could not stay; she'd needed to gain control of her feelings. And yet, here she was, expecting the gentleman to arrive at Charwell Park within the next few minutes, and she was as unprepared to converse with him now as she had been then.

A rattle of hooves and rumble of wheels sounded outside, and Phoebe deviated back to the window. The Dunsbourne carriage was rolling down the drive toward the house. She took a deep breath. She had issued this invitation for Emily's sake. To his credit, Lord Dunsbourne had allowed her to come, but the fact remained, this meeting before the ball was for Emily. If she could simply keep that truth foremost in her mind, surely she could ignore Lord Dunsbourne's presence in the house.

She had thought long and hard upon her father's counsel. Up until now, nothing the baron had said or done corroborated the vile rumors that surrounded him. But he had done nothing to obviate them either. And the fact remained that up until the Palmers' dinner, he and Emily had rarely been seen. Why? Instinct told Phoebe that if she could discover that single truth, she might uncover a great deal about Lord Dunsbourne's character. Her heart told her it was worth the effort; her head told her to leave well enough alone. She had a sinking feeling that by the end of the evening, she would be suffering from a severe ache in one of those two organs.

Voices reached her from the main hall. Having informed her parents of the baron's plans to stop here on the way to the ball, Phoebe had instructed Mrs. Wilson to show Emily to Phoebe's bedchamber while Gresham directed Lord Dunsbourne to her father's study. Her father was not one to take hours preparing for an evening out, and Phoebe guessed he would be more than happy to converse with the baron over a glass of brandy while they waited for the ladies to ready themselves.

Phoebe's mother, on the other hand, was usually in her chambers until the last possible minute. Initially, she had been aghast that Phoebe had issued an invitation at such an inconvenient time, and it had taken days of placating and persuading to have her concede that this

could be considered an informal neighborly visit and that another more formal invitation to dinner could be issued in the near future. Seeing as the last discussion they had shared involved the state of her mother's hair, Phoebe hoped she was now worrying more about her appearance at the ball than about social protocols when a baron came to call. Phoebe considered it unlikely that they would see her mother until it was time to go.

There was a knock on the door, and Lucy swiftly crossed the room to open it. Mrs. Wilson stood in the passageway with Emily beside her.

"Miss Norton is here to see you, Miss Hadford."

"Wonderful." Phoebe stepped forward, giving Emily a welcoming smile. "Oh, Emily, you look lovely. Your gown is just as beautiful as I remembered. Come in, and we shall set Lucy to work on your hair right away."

Emily walked into the room and gazed around curiously. "Your bedchamber reflects your personality."

Phoebe laughed. "Do I dare ask why?"

"It is bright and cheerful and encourages you to linger." Emily gave a shy smile. "Just like you."

Emily's observation touched her. "I believe that is one of the nicest things anyone has said to me."

"Then perhaps you need more friends too."

"That may be true, but I do not think I shall find another so good as you."

Phoebe led her to the chair positioned in front of the dressing table. It was impossible not to love Emily's guileless nature. No matter what her brother may or may not have done, she was a gem.

Adam had forgotten how pleasant it could be to relax in a comfortable armchair and talk to another gentleman about matters completely unrelated to Freddie Payne, balancing ledger books, or harvesting apples. His conversation with Mr. Hadford had been interesting and enlightening. Adam knew little about the textile industry that appeared to be developing a firm foothold in Yorkshire; he knew even less about the burgeoning industry in Amsterdam.

"I would never recommend a gentleman place money into a new endeavor without serious and careful personal study of all the particulars." Mr. Hadford set his glass on the nearby end table before continuing. "But I will say this, my lord. If and when the time comes that you wish to invest, the textile industry is worth your consideration. Den Haan in Amsterdam, in particular, appears to have a good head for business."

Mr. Hadford could have no idea how close to the mark his comment had come. Surely Adam's life would be very different if his father had only taken the time to thoroughly research Freddie Payne's claims before handing over the Dunsbourne fortune.

"I appreciate the suggestion," Adam said. "And fully concur with your counsel. Too often, gentlemen commit to investments based on little more than gossamer promises."

"Exactly right, my lord, which is why this cider production of yours has me so intrigued. There's no question of its existence. No waiting around for ships to come in. This is something I can see and taste for myself—and not more than a mile from my own doorstep, at that."

"True enough. You are welcome to come and see what we are about. The mill is in place, and if the weather holds, we should be picking in earnest within the fortnight."

Mr. Hadford rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I must return to London to attend to some business matters at the end of the week and do not know exactly how long I shall be gone. Would you countenance a visit before then? On Wednesday, perhaps?"

"I shall look forward to it," Adam said, surprised by how much he meant it. He did not know Mr. Hadford well enough to make an informed decision on the man's character, but so far, he liked what he saw.

"Capital." Mr. Hadford withdrew a pocket watch and glanced at it. "I fear our peace and quiet is about to come to an end, my lord. It is time to enter the fray."

Adam chuckled. "I shall not be the one to keep you, sir," he said, coming to his feet.

Mr. Hadford sighed and rose more slowly. "More's the pity, my lord. More's the pity."

Adam followed Mr. Hadford out of his study and into the main hall.

Their footsteps echoed across the marble tile floor. The butler standing at the base of the elegant staircase inclined his head at their approach and then turned to face the top of the stairs and the sound of female voices.

Mrs. Hadford descended first. Dressed in a peach-colored gown, she was all feathers and lace.

She smiled at Mr. Hadford when he extended his arm to her and then dropped into a curtsy before Adam. "Welcome to Charwell Park, my lord. Forgive me for not greeting you when you first arrived."

"Think nothing of it," Adam said. "I had no desire to interrupt your preparations for the ball, and Mr. Hadford and I have spent a very enjoyable time together."

The tension in her shoulders lessened somewhat. "I am glad to hear it. I hope Miss Norton's time has been equally beneficial."

As if waiting for that very cue, Miss Hadford and Emily appeared on the landing above. Adam could only stare. If he had ever doubted that his little sister was no longer a child, the sight of her now put an end to it. Her dark hair was piled onto her head in a mass of ringlets. Tiny ribbons, the same color as her elegant turquoise gown, were tucked amongst her curls, adding charm to her already delightful appearance. His gaze moved to Miss Hadford, and his heart stuttered. Heaven help him. What was it about this woman that left him near undone each time he saw her? A profusion of tiny rose buds covered her cream-colored gown. Wide lace peeked out from her sleeves and along her neckline. Her hair cascaded over her shoulders in thick, soft curls, and she was watching Emily's progress down the stairs with open delight. At his side, Mr. Hadford chuckled. "I believe you have rendered your brother speechless, Miss Norton."

Thanking his lucky stars that Mr. Hadford was no mind reader, Adam stepped forward and extended his arm to his sister. "You are a vision, Emily," he said.

She smiled shyly. "Thank you, Adam."

Miss Hadford joined them in the hall, and Mrs. Hadford quickly took charge. "If everyone is ready, I believe we should be off." She looked to Adam. "Will you and your sister be traveling separately, my lord?" "That was my intent." Adam was not willing to relinquish his ability to leave the function early regardless of the economy of riding together.

"I believe both carriages are already outside, my dear," Mr. Hadford said, effectively ending the discussion before it went any further.

"Whenever you are ready, Dunsbourne."

On silent feet, the butler moved across the hall to open the front door. Adam inclined his head toward his hosts. "Many thanks, Mr. Hadford, Mrs. Hadford, Miss Hadford. We shall see you at Banbury Hall."

Chapter 12

PHOEBE STEPPED THROUGH THE OPEN doorway and gazed around the vast room. There could be no doubt—Mrs. Webb had outdone herself. The ballroom shimmered with light from the many candelabras positioned around the room. Boughs of greenery and fresh flowers hung from the walls, and in the far corner, musicians played, warming up their fingers and instruments in readiness for the dancing that was to come.

Their music floated over and around the many ladies and gentlemen in the room, blending with the excited chatter. Ahead of her, her parents paused to greet Lord Trimble. Phoebe continued farther into the room, passing the clusters of gossiping matrons and the ever-popular refreshment table, all the while scanning the crowd for Emily.

She was halfway across the room when she heard her name being called. Looking to her right, she spotted Marianne and Georgiana beckoning to her. She crossed the short distance between them.

“You look lovely, Phoebe.” Marianne greeted her with a smile.

“That goes without saying,” Georgiana said. “She always does.”

Phoebe chose to ignore the irritation in Georgiana’s voice. “That is very kind. Although, I have rarely seen such beautiful gowns as the ones each of you is wearing.” Marianne’s crimson silk gown was stunning; Georgiana’s pale-green gown was extravagantly decorated with bows and lace.

Georgiana sniffed. “You may change your mind when you see Miss Norton this evening.”

“She and Lord Dunsbourne are here,” Marianne said, her voice low. She looked left and right as though needing reassurance that neither was within earshot. “And you would not believe the change in Miss Norton.”

Pressing her lips together to prevent a smile from escaping, Phoebe raised her eyebrows. “Is that so?”

Marianne nodded, her eyes wide. “If she were not so firmly affixed to her brother’s side, I would not have known her.”

“It makes no difference what she wears or how she does her hair,”

Georgiana said. “She is tainted by association. No one of consequence will spare her a second glance.”

Marianne nodded again. This time more firmly.

Like an unstoppable incoming tide, Phoebe’s indignation rose. “That is preposterous. Even if Lord Dunsbourne is the cad you believe him to be, Miss Norton has done nothing wrong.”

At the Palmers’ dinner, Marianne and Georgiana had been bemoaning Emily’s fate as a victim of her brother’s cruelty. Now, with nothing more than a change in hairstyle and dress, she had become a target.

“Believe what you will,” Georgiana said with a dismissive shrug. “It will not change the way others view her.”

“Georgiana is right, Phoebe,” Marianne said. “And if you remember, Derrick told you the very same when we visited you at Charwell Park. You have not lived here long enough to grasp the situation well enough.”

Phoebe took a step back. “I understand it sufficiently to know that ostracizing Miss Norton is not right.”

Georgiana and Marianne exchanged an uncomfortable look, but before either of them could say anything more, the music stopped and a man’s voice rose above the rest.

“My lords, ladies, and gentlemen, please take your places for the minuet.”

All around them, couples took to the floor. Phoebe turned, her heart sinking as she saw Mr. Webb striding across the room toward her.

“Good evening, Miss Hadford,” he said, greeting her with a bow. “I believe this dance is mine.”

“Of course.” Phoebe curtsied and then placed her gloved hand on his sleeve.

With a well-pleased smile, he led her away.

“I must say, you look quite ravishing tonight, Miss Hadford.”

Phoebe’s stomach roiled. She supposed there were young ladies who would be thrilled to hear such words from so eligible a gentleman, but Mr. Webb’s overly affected compliment made her acutely uncomfortable.

He grinned wolfishly. “You have nothing to say?”

The musicians played the opening bars of a familiar tune.

“Only that I look forward to the dance, sir.”

It did not seem to occur to him that her comment was anything more than an expression of her happiness at being singled out. He straightened his shoulders and guided her through the first few steps. Phoebe breathed a sigh of relief. The minuet was not a dance that invited discussion, which meant that instead of making small talk, she could watch for Emily as they worked their way around the room.

The ballroom was full, and it would have been almost impossible to spot her petite friend had it not been for Lord Dunsbourne’s commanding presence. The baron was standing beside a large Grecian urn with his back to the french windows. Emily was at his side, watching the dancers with undisguised fascination. Phoebe moved gradually closer, finally catching Emily’s eye. She smiled, and Emily smiled in return. Phoebe turned a full circle and glanced at the baron. He was watching Mr. Webb, his expression grim.

At last, the dance ended. Mr. Webb walked Phoebe back to Georgiana and Marianne. It was the opposite direction from where she wished to

go, but she kept her silence until the gentleman released her hand and bowed.

"Thank you, Mr. Webb," she said, itching to walk away.

"It was my pleasure," he said.

"And now, I sincerely hope it shall be mine." A corpulent gentleman wearing a white wig and a dark-green jacket barreled past Mr. Webb and bowed to Phoebe. "If you would do me the honor, Miss Hadford." If Phoebe could have refused without being irreparably rude to Mr. Gridley, she would have done so. As it was, she attempted to hide her dismay, curtsied, and accepted the local magistrate's arm for the next dance.

The gigue was almost too much for the poor man. Mr. Gridley's hops and leaps soon found him red in the face and unable to maintain a conversation. That suited Phoebe very well. She used the time to consider how best to help Emily. As far as she could tell, the young lady had little hope of social interaction unless she was separated from her brother. No one would dare approach Emily with Lord Dunsbourne looming over her. And if what Marianne and Georgiana said was true, even without the baron at her side, Emily would need a significant boost to bypass the prejudice of the Webbs and their guests.

If only her sister, Jane, and the Earl of Bloxley were here, she would have all the help she needed. The Bloxleys were the most respected family in the area. Their acceptance of Emily would mean everything. Phoebe missed a step as a fresh thought entered her mind. Yes, the earl and his new wife were out of the country, but the dowager Lady Bloxley was still in residence. Phoebe began scanning the crowd again, this time searching for an elderly, white-haired lady with ostentatious style.

Lady Bloxley was not hard to find. She sat in state not far from a large flower arrangement, her hair ratted to perfection and her pink gown covered in ribbon roses. Half a dozen matrons hovered nearby, each of them occasionally nodding to the whispered comments passing to and fro between them. Phoebe's stomach clenched. It was a risk. Lady Bloxley was known for being a stickler for protocol, but she was also not afraid to take a stand. If she chose to acknowledge Emily, it would make all the difference.

The musicians played the final strains of the gigue, and the magistrate huffed and puffed his way through the last steps, ending with a breathless bow.

"Marvelous, Miss Hadford," he said, pressing a handkerchief to his dripping forehead. "Absolutely marvelous."

She curtsied. "Thank you, sir."

He extended his arm to lead her back across the room, but several

young gentlemen were now congregated there, and experience told her she would have no more than a minute to catch her breath before she would be requested for another dance. A glance over her shoulder toward the french windows revealed that nothing had changed during the course of the dance. Lord Dunsbourne and Emily remained in splendid isolation beside the urn.

"Would you be good enough to walk me to the windows, Mr. Gridley?" she said. "I find myself in need of some fresh air."

"A capital suggestion, Miss Hadford. I could use some air myself." He mopped his brow again, and the look of relief on his face would have been laughable if Phoebe had not been battling severe nervousness over what she was about to do.

He walked her to the glass doors, and she lifted her hand from his sleeve. "Thank you, Mr. Gridley. The air is cooler already. I see a friend with whom I must speak. I will leave you here so that you may step outside and enjoy the evening."

Disappointment clouded his watery eyes, but he rallied quickly. "As you wish, Miss Hadford."

She smiled politely and made her escape. Or rather, she took a dozen steps to escape one difficulty only to face a greater one.

"Lord Dunsbourne," she said, bobbing a curtsy even as her pulse raced.

"Good evening, Miss Hadford," he said.

"I have loved watching you dance, Phoebe," Emily said.

Phoebe's heart went out to her. "That is very kind, but I shall not be truly happy until I see you on the dance floor."

Emily's face fell. "I am not sure I will remember the steps; I learned them so recently. It is better that I watch this time."

Phoebe knew the look in Emily's eyes all too well. Jane had attempted to conceal a similar hurt at every dance they had attended together. Phoebe was not going to stand by and allow someone else she cared about to suffer unnecessarily.

She slid her arm through Emily's. "Will you allow me to help you through your initial fears?"

Emily hesitated. "I believe good friends do that sort of thing."

"They do indeed." Phoebe smiled. "And we have become the best of friends, have we not?"

"Yes. Yes, we have."

Phoebe turned to face Lord Dunsbourne. "And you, my lord? Do you trust me to do all I can to help your sister succeed?"

The baron's jaw tightened. "I do not trust easily, Miss Hadford."

"That will make the situation harder for you, my lord, but no less necessary."

He remained silent, his dark eyes searching hers. Phoebe was

beginning to wonder if her heart would survive this encounter, but then he gave a slight nod.

"Very well. But I shall be watching," he said.

"Good. Perhaps you will be reminded of what it means to socialize," she said, and before Lord Dunsbourne could respond, she turned from his stunned expression and led Emily away.

A few deep breaths helped calm Phoebe but did nothing to remove the anxiety from Emily's eyes.

"Where are we going?" Emily asked.

"There is someone I should like you to meet. People who do not know her well consider her a bit of a dragon, but I have come to discover she is not so bad as all that."

"That is not terribly encouraging." Emily was looking even more worried now than she had before.

Phoebe squeezed her arm. "I give you my word, she is not nearly as intimidating as your brother."

"Adam?"

Her shock was so great that Phoebe laughed. "Yes, my dear Emily. Lord Dunsbourne would put a Spartan soldier to shame."

Emily glanced back over her shoulder. "He is standing with his feet apart and his arms folded, with a rather large scowl on his face."

"Exactly."

Phoebe did not need to turn around to know that the baron's gaze was upon her. She could feel it. Unfortunately, he was not the only one. As she and Emily made their slow walk along the edge of the ballroom, the eyes of everyone they passed turned to watch their progress. She heard the whispers and stiffened her spine. She could do this. For Emily.

As they drew nearer, the matrons ceased their chatter. Lady Bloxley raised her head and watched their approach curiously.

"Good evening, Miss Hadford," she said.

Phoebe curtsied on trembling legs. "And to you, my lady. I am happy to see you in such good health."

Lady Bloxley ignored the remark as if the sentiment were expected and looked pointedly at Emily. "Who is this you have with you?"

"This is Miss Norton, my lady. I especially wished to introduce her to you as you may have known her parents, Lord and Lady Dunsbourne."

Emily dropped into a curtsy. Lady Bloxley studied her with critical eyes, and Phoebe held her breath. The music continued to play, and the dancers continued to dance, but all around Lady Bloxley, the air hung silent.

"Your mother was a good friend of mine." The older lady cleared her throat. "You resemble her a great deal in appearance, Miss Norton. Do you have her same gentle spirit?"

"I do not have any memories of her, my lady—I wish that I did—but I have heard much of her kindness to others, and I would very much like to be thought of in a similar light."

Lady Bloxley nodded, a slow smile appearing on her lined face. "That is exactly what I would have expected your mother to say." She reached out her hand to take Emily's. "Tell me, Are the rose bushes your mother planted in front of Dunsbourne Manor still as vibrant as ever?"

"Yes, my lady. The yellow one is my particular favorite."

"Ah, your mother also loved that one. For myself, the pink Cristata rose growing beneath the parlor window cannot be equaled."

Emily smiled. "The ribbon flowers on your gown remind me very much of those blossoms. They are lovely."

"As are you, my dear." She released Emily's hand and waved her toward the dance floor. "Now, off with you. You have far more exciting things to do this evening than to talk about roses with an old lady."

"Perhaps we can speak of them together another time." Emily's voice rang with genuine desire, and Lady Bloxley raised one eyebrow.

"I shall hold you to that, Miss Norton."

"I sincerely hope that you will," Emily said.

She and Phoebe bobbed curtsies once more, and then Phoebe led her behind the nearby flower arrangement. "Oh, Emily." She hugged her. Not even in her wildest dreams could she have pictured Lady Bloxley responding so well. "You were marvelous."

Emily blinked with surprise. "Lady Bloxley is no dragon at all."

Phoebe raised her hand to her mouth to muffle her laughter. "If you only knew. Three quarters of the young ladies in this ballroom would never dare approach her. Your guileless nature enabled her to see right away that you are just as good as your mother must have been."

"Perhaps it helped that I love Mother's roses."

"Yes. And that you have already conquered your dragon brother."

It was Emily's turn to laugh. "I thought he was a Spartan soldier."

"That all depends," Phoebe said. "Is he breathing fire yet?"

Emily peeked out from around the flowers. "No flames to be seen, but he is heading this way."

"Come." Phoebe grabbed her hand and pulled her out of their hiding spot. Without looking around, she hurried across the dance floor and away from the baron. "He cannot reclaim you yet. Lady Bloxley has just thrown open the door; you have more people to meet."

Chapter 13

ADAM CAME TO A STOP as Miss Hadford burst out from behind the flowers and raced away with Emily in tow. What on earth was she up to? Against his better judgment, he'd let Emily go with her. Had either of them even been aware of the stir they had caused walking the length of the ballroom together? All heads had turned to watch them go by. Whispered conversations and reproving looks had followed. Adam did not mind the snubs for himself. If this was the price to pay for ignoring Society for five years, so be it, but he hated to see Emily suffer because of a decision he had made.

He had continued watching, biding his time until he'd seen the look of fear on his sister's face as they'd approached Lady Bloxley. That had been too much, and he had immediately set out to rescue her. Now, however, Miss Hadford was making saving Emily infinitely more difficult by cutting across the dance floor mid-dance. It was the height of impropriety; even he knew that, and yet she had done it without hesitation. Releasing a frustrated breath, he took the longer route around the room.

By the time he circumvented the dancers and Miss Hadford was once more in view, Emily was out of sight. He passed the refreshment table and the musicians without sparing either a second look, and then he saw her. Emily was standing behind another young lady in a yellow gown. She turned her head to listen to something a dark-haired gentleman said, and then she laughed. Adam's feet slowed.

He watched as Miss Hadford introduced Emily to two more gentlemen. They bowed politely, and Emily smiled. From beyond the cluster of people now surrounding his sister, Miss Webb and Miss Chapman appeared. They walked stiffly past, their faces averted. Miss Webb glanced at Miss Chapman doubtfully. Miss Chapman responded by raising her chin. The uppity gesture infuriated Adam, but then he saw Miss Hadford. She was also watching the two young ladies. But the look in her eyes was not anger; it was sorrow. He relaxed his clenched fists. Miss Hadford was in the right. If Miss Webb and Miss Chapman chose to ignore Emily, it was their loss.

Behind him, the music ended. The guests clapped their approval, and the room became a mass of movement. Couples came and went, and when the space between him and Miss Hadford and Emily finally cleared, both young ladies were gone. In a moment of panic, he scanned the crowd. A flash of turquoise caught his eye on the dance floor, and as the first notes of the allemande began again, he saw Emily standing beside the dark-haired gentleman. This would be the first time his diffident sister would perform the dance outside Dunsbourne Manor's drawing room, and yet she was beaming. Miss

Hadford stood near her, partnered with a white-wigged gentleman. As Adam watched, Miss Hadford met his eyes. Warmth filled his chest. She had worked this miracle for Emily; it had been her doing from start to finish. Unbidden, a smile parted his lips, but she was already gone, skipping down the dance floor beside her partner.

Adam stood alone. To his right, a small group of young men were laughing over something. He made out the words Oxford and prankster and gathered they were recounting a recent escapade. He had lived in that world once. It seemed incredibly far removed now. A couple of young ladies walked past but spared him no glance.

“Having difficulty finding a willing dance partner, Dunsbourne?”

Adam recognized the cocky voice without having to turn around. Derrick Webb had been a couple years behind him at Eton but had somehow always managed to weasel his way into the older boys’ events—particularly if they’d involved high-stakes card games. One year, he had walked away with Wilbur Barlow’s entire unopened Christmas package, claiming the prefect was a chump for betting it all on a game he could not win. Webb may have thought he’d been the victor that day, but as far as Adam was concerned, it had been further proof that the young man was nothing more than an also-ran.

“I have yet to ask anyone,” he said. “As much as I appreciate your parents’ invitation, I am here simply as an escort to my sister.”

“And yet, she is dancing with another gentleman.”

“She is, indeed.” He would not give Webb the satisfaction of rising to his barely concealed taunt.

“There are several other young ladies in want of a partner.” Webb gestured toward the two who had recently passed by and were now standing near the refreshment table.

“So I suppose. Please, do not let me prevent you from claiming one of them for the next dance.”

Webb smirked. “Your nod to chivalry does you credit, Dunsbourne. A shame reality paints a different portrait.” He walked away. Adam watched him go with a frown. What did the louse mean by that last jab? Other than letting loyal servants go when he no longer had the means to pay them an honest wage, there was nothing in his conduct to others that was so reprehensible as to cause a blemish on his character.

The music came to an end, and those on the dance floor made their way to the edges of the ballroom. Emily was claimed for the next dance several yards before she reached him. Miss Hadford made it little farther before another gentleman escorted her back the way she had come. Adam studied those milling around him. Not one met his eyes. Not one greeted him. Was there more behind their treatment of him than his having been absent?

He looked at Emily. She was glowing. Something significant had changed the moment she had left his side. What did Miss Hadford know that he did not? He turned his attention to the lady, memory of what it felt like to dance with her washing over him as he watched her glide effortlessly across the floor. Did her current partner feel anything close to what he had experienced when holding her hand? He wanted the answer to be no; he needed the answer to be no. The sudden and overwhelming desire to dance with her again shook him. He flexed his fingers and glanced at the musicians behind him. The current song was coming to a close.

Adam waited until the last note was played, and then he moved. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Mr. Wakefield start in the same direction. He picked up his pace, arriving beside Miss Hadford before she and her partner had cleared the edge of the dance floor. He did not know the gentleman, but perhaps that was for the best.

He inclined his head toward the young lady. "May I have the pleasure of the next dance, Miss Hadford?"

Her blue eyes met his—conveying first surprise and then hesitation. For one awful moment, he thought she might refuse him. Then she gave a slight nod, and turning to the gentleman at her side, she smiled.

"Thank you, Mr. Smythe. It appears that you need escort me no farther."

He bowed. "As you wish, Miss Hadford."

The gentleman relinquished her hand, and with an uncertain glance at Adam, he stepped away. Adam took his place and offered her his hand. Once again, he sensed her trepidation.

"I will not bite, Miss Hadford. Indeed, if I make a real effort, I believe I can make it through the entire dance without so much as a scowl."

She bit her lip as though fighting a smile. "That is a worthy goal, my lord."

Relief brought a matching smile to his lips. "Then consider it done." She gave him her hand. No matter that they both wore gloves, he felt the connection immediately. It pulsed between them as real as it was intangible. He walked her to the center of the ballroom. Somewhere behind them, a woman gasped. Murmuring followed. Miss Hadford kept her eyes forward, her expression calm, but in his hand, her fingers tensed. He squeezed them gently. He did not know what this was about, but he was beginning to think it was time to find out.

"We appear to be causing a stir," he said.

"Yes."

He waited. Was that truly all she was going to say on the matter?

"You'd best be careful, my lord. The frown developing on your brow looks to become a scowl very soon."

Blast it all. She was right. He smoothed his forehead and began again. "I believe it is long past time to thank you for all that you have done for my sister."

This time, Miss Hadford's expression softened. "My role was small. Emily's hair and gown are lovely tonight, but her true beauty radiates from within."

"I cannot argue with you on that score." Adam had already caught sight of Emily rising from her chair for yet another gentleman at the other end of the ballroom.

"It did not take more than a brief introduction for others to recognize her goodness," Miss Hadford said.

He pondered that observation as the music began. How long had it been since he'd been willing to accept someone at face value? "Would you claim that the same could be said about you, Miss Hadford?"

The musicians began to play.

Phoebe stepped to the right and turned a full circle before facing him again. "I do not think any young lady would be so bold, my lord."

"Forgive me for being blunt. I have seen the irreparable damage that can occur when a person misjudges another's character." He raised his arm, grateful that he remembered the steps well enough to execute them without thought.

She turned, keeping her gaze firmly on him. "You have been duped in the past?"

They moved apart and then came together again.

"An error was made," he said, not willing to implicate his father. "It damaged my family and all in our sphere." He circled her. "That is why I hesitate to draw conclusions about another without serious consideration."

"I have attempted a similar approach recently," she said. "It is not easily done." She circled him again, and when she faced him once more, there was curiosity in her eyes. "We have not known each other long, I admit, but I shall be brave and ask your assessment of me thus far."

Adam's opinion of Miss Hadford was changing more rapidly than he cared to admit—especially to the lady in question. He took the few moments they danced apart to formulate his response.

"I will answer your question by responding to the one I posed to you," he said. "I think you unwittingly defined yourself when you described Emily. You are beautiful to behold, but I believe there is considerably more to you than what meets the eye."

They continued through the set, her movements flowing naturally even as a hint of color touched her cheeks.

"And now it is your turn," he said, emboldened by the knowledge that his compliment was the cause of her blush. "It is time for you to share

your assessment of me.”

They stepped toward each other. She faced him, but two small creases lined her brow. “I do not know the details of your past, my lord, but I do not think you are the villain you are accused of being.”

He missed a step. “I am considered a villain?”

His shock must have manifested itself in his voice because confusion clouded her eyes. She turned another circle. “You did not know?”

Adam’s thought’s whirled in unison with Miss Hadford’s skirts. The slights, the whispers, the stares—they were suddenly more significant. He saw the shunning of Emily whilst she stood at his side versus her acceptance after Miss Hadford orchestrated her introduction to Lady Bloxley with fresh eyes. Emily had been given her Ladyship’s approval, and that had been sufficient to remove her from under his shadow. Miss Hadford had known. That had been her goal all along. “What exactly are people saying about me?”

He could not imagine what manner of maligning rumors had been spread over the last five years. His absence had surely fueled any potential embers into a fiery inferno.

The music had ended. He had not noticed until now. But all around him, couples were leaving the dance floor. Miss Hadford stood facing him. If he did not know better, he would say there were tears in her eyes.

He clenched his fists. “I ask you again, Miss Hadford, what are people saying about me?”

“That . . .” She swallowed. “That you lost your entire family fortune in a drunken wager, and . . . and that the shock of it killed your father.” Pain, deep and cutting, slashed through his chest. He caught his breath in a vain attempt to control it. The unfairness of the accusation paled in comparison to the knowledge that those who knew him believed him capable of such a thing.

“I see.” He led her off the dance floor. They were still several feet from the other guests when he stopped. Releasing her hand, he bowed. It was all he had left to give. “I am twice amazed that you consented to dance with so vile a man, Miss Hadford. Forgive me for not walking you all the way back to your friends. I find that I must locate my sister immediately.”

Then he did the unthinkable. He turned on his heel and left Miss Hadford standing alone at the edge the ballroom.

The letter had come—and in excellent time. Freddie carried it to the small writing desk in his makeshift accommodations and set it down. Taking a knife, he held the blade over the candle's flame long enough to warm the metal, then he slid it carefully beneath the seal. As he had hoped, the hardened wax peeled off the paper in an undamaged lump. Setting it aside, Freddie unfolded the paper.

Voorburgwal 95, Amsterdam

23 September 1788

Dear Mr. Wilmott,

I was pleased to receive your recent correspondence and to learn of your interest in investing in den Haan Textiles. I consider my company's products to be second to none, and I am delighted to know that the excellence we strive to achieve in the Dutch Republic has been duly noted in England.

New printing techniques are being developed as we speak, and although they will require considerable funding to implement, I am confident that the financial remuneration to be recouped by our investors shall be considerable.

If you remain interested in backing this venture, might I suggest a visit to Amsterdam. I should be most happy to give you a tour of our facility followed by an overview of our future plans. Please make arrangements to come at your earliest convenience.

Yours sincerely,

Willem den Haan

Freddie read the message quickly but studied the script deliberately. Tidy, even letters. The lines were well spaced, the style consistent throughout, and the signature at the bottom revealed the gentleman's artistic flair. Excitement bubbled in Freddie's chest. Den Haan's handwriting would be extraordinarily easy to counterfeit, and his grasp of the English language was remarkably good. Freddie would not need to use broken English to make his letter look as though a foreign hand had penned it.

He leaned back in his chair, his eyes glinting at the thought of what lay ahead. Den Haan would likely remain blissfully unaware of this new undertaking, but the Dutchman was about to make Freddie Payne an obscenely large amount of money.

Chapter 14

PHOEBE WATCHED A ROBIN HOP into the birdbath outside the drawing room window. The small bird flapped its wings wildly, sending water droplets airborne before it fluttered back onto the birdbath's rim and fluffed out its feathers with a happy trill. Phoebe sighed, her shoulders slumping. The sun was shining. The birds were singing.

And she was miserable.

"Much more moping and you will ruin your posture forever," her mother said, looking up from her stitching. "Honestly, Phoebe, the ball was four days ago. You are undoubtedly the only person still worrying about Lord Dunsbourne's hasty departure. If he or his sister were seriously ill, someone at the house would have sent for a doctor by now, and we would have received word about it from someone."

"I am sure you are right, Mother." That was the nature of gossip, was it not? It spread with or without the knowledge of those whose names were being bandied about.

Phoebe closed her eyes against the painful thought but was unable to erase the vision of Lord Dunsbourne's face from her mind's eye. She wished she could see him as he had been in his orchard, with his dark hair blowing in the wind and his eyes bright with enthusiasm for his work. Instead, she was haunted by the gutted expression she'd seen on his face when she'd told him the offenses others had laid at his feet.

"Of course I am right." Her mother patted the spot beside her on the sofa. "Come sit beside me and work on your stitchery. It will do you good to have something to show for your time this afternoon."

Her mother was right. She had accomplished virtually nothing since returning home from the ball. The initial stir over the baron and his sister leaving the ball as unexpectedly as they had come had quickly turned to idle speculation over Lord Dunsbourne's tyrannical rule over Emily. Phoebe's dismay over the gentleman's response to her revelation had quickly turned to indignation as she'd seen the rumors multiply and spread around the ballroom. By the time she'd slipped under the covers of her bed that night, despair over what those thoughtless tongues had done—that evening and in the past—had overwhelmed her. There was no doubt in her mind anymore. No matter what Society alleged, Lord Dunsbourne was not the blackguard he was purported to be.

She walked away from the window. Her mother was correct in one aspect: she needed to do something to conquer her feeling of helplessness. She could not erase the damage done in the past, but perhaps she could make a difference for the future. Lord Dunsbourne might never wish to see her again, but she did not believe Emily

would feel the same. Even if she could not visit, there were other ways to be in contact and to show support.

"May I use the carriage, Mother?"

Her mother gave her a startled look. "Where do you intend to go?"

"To the village. Rather than stitch, I shall write some long-overdue letters. An outing—if only to the post office—will be a welcome thing."

"I agree." Her mother relaxed. A trip of that nature was innocuous enough. "Take Lucy with you. It will be good for you to have some fresh air."

Now that she had some direction, it did not take Phoebe long to write a letter to Emily. She also wrote a brief note to Jane, promising her another longer letter soon, and then she joined Lucy in the main hall, where she claimed her bonnet, gloves, and shawl from Gresham. The carriage was already waiting outside, and within an hour of having made her decision, they were on their way.

It was under three miles to the village of High Brodmore. The country road was lined with tangled hedgerows, and in the pastures beyond, cows and horses grazed lazily in the sunshine. As the carriage rolled past, Phoebe allowed the peace inherent in the pastoral scenery to calm her troubled heart.

The driver pulled up to the village green and jumped down to help Lucy and Phoebe alight.

"Thank you, Sam," Phoebe said. "We will not be long."

"Very good, miss."

With her letters in hand, she crossed the road to the post office and entered the small shop with Lucy beside her.

Mrs. Purvis, the postmistress, recognized her at once. "Good day, Miss Hadford. How may I help you?"

"I have two letters, Mrs. Purvis," Phoebe said. "One local, one overseas."

She handed the postmistress the envelopes and withdrew a few coins from her reticule.

"I shall see that they go out first thing tomorrow morning, miss."

"Splendid." Offering Mrs. Purvis a nod of thanks, Phoebe turned to go.

"Good afternoon to you."

"Good afternoon, Miss Hadford."

The doorbell jingled, and Phoebe stepped outside. A few doors down, another bell sounded. She glanced that way to see Marianne Webb exiting the milliner's shop. Phoebe's pulse quickened. She had not spoken to Marianne since she'd introduced Emily to Lady Bloxley. Admittedly, whenever Marianne had not been on the dance floor, she had been in the company of Georgiana Chapman, and Georgiana was not one to countenance opposition.

Unsure of how she would be received now that they were alone, aside from Lucy, she walked toward her. "Good day, Marianne."

Marianne swung around, her hand on her chest. "Phoebe! You gave me such a start!"

"Forgive me. I did not mean to startle you."

Marianne shifted uncomfortably. "My head must have been in the clouds. I did not see you there."

"Are you buying a new bonnet?"

"A bonnet?" She frowned. "Oh. No." She cleared her throat. "I was looking at ribbons."

"I see." Phoebe's comment was more polite than true. She had never known Marianne to enter the milliner's shop without purchasing something.

"Derrick wished to take his new curricule for a spin, and taking me to the shop gave him the excuse he needed to harness Father's bays." The words came out in a rush, and after she'd said them, she glanced anxiously up and down the road. "He said he would just drive around the village a couple of times and then come back for me."

Phoebe experienced a wave of pity for the young lady. Would she ever have the courage to act upon her own beliefs and wishes rather than constantly bowing to Georgiana's and Mr. Webb's strong wills?

"When did Mr. Webb acquire a curricule?"

"Two days ago. Apparently, one of his old school chums was down on his luck, so Derrick offered to take it off his hands."

It seemed too considerate an act for the self-centered gentleman that Phoebe knew.

"Losing his curricule must have been a severe blow for the poor fellow."

Marianne shrugged. "Derrick says his friend deserved it for playing his hand so foolishly."

"Your brother won the curricule in a card game?"

Phoebe's indignation must have been evident in her voice because Marianne instantly looked anxious again.

"You must not tell anyone. If word were to get back to my father, there is no telling what he might do." The clatter of rapidly moving hooves drew Marianne's attention to the other side of the village green. "You see. Here comes Derrick now."

Phoebe had mere seconds to gather whatever self-control she could muster or risk unleashing her mounting fury on Mr. Webb. When she considered that he'd had the audacity to disparage Lord Dunsbourne for doing something he himself participated in so fully . . . She could not think on it now. Not when the despicable gentleman was reining the horses to a stop before her.

"Well met, Miss Hadford," he called. "May I take you for a turn

around the green?"

"I thank you for the offer, sir, but I must be heading home."

"Let me take you there. Marianne will not mind waiting a few more minutes, and your driver can take your maid back in the carriage."

Quite apart from the fact that Phoebe would not have Marianne stand on the pavement and wait on her account, Mr. Webb's suggestion made her skin crawl. She would rather sit on the village green's bench beside a snake than be with him in the close confines of a curricule.

"Thank you, but no." She took a step back. "Good day, Marianne. I hope to see you again soon."

Without another word to Mr. Webb, Phoebe turned and walked away. For a full ten seconds, the sound of Lucy's and her footsteps were the only things that broke the deafening silence. Then one of the horses snorted, and Mr. Webb cursed.

"How long do you intend to keep me waiting, Marianne? Get in."

"Come along, Lucy," Phoebe whispered. "I should like to be safely inside our carriage before Mr. Webb drives by."

Her loyal maid picked up her pace, and together they hurried across the road. Sam had the carriage door open when they reached it and was assisting Phoebe up the step when the curricule tore past, spitting gravel from beneath its wheels as it sped around the green.

Adam ran his sleeve across his forehead. He was grateful for the sunshine, but the afternoon heat made his work particularly fatiguing. "That should do it, m' lord." Henry stood beside the large mound of apples with his hands on his hips. "I reckon that's enough fer another tump."

Adam nodded. "I agree. Cover them with straw, Henry. We've made a good start."

"Aye. Things will move a lot faster when the lads from the village arrive." Henry raised a pitchfork full of straw from the nearby barrow and tossed it over the apples on the ground. "I told 'em they'd be needed in the orchard on Friday. I reckon by then we'll need to harvest the rest of the Blenheim Oranges and the King of the Pippins." "Agreed," Adam said. "The Genet Moyles can stay on the trees a little longer if need be. They hold on well, even when they're ripe."

The three varieties of apple were essential to the unique cider blend Adam and Henry had perfected. Each type of apple benefited from time on the ground in tumps, where the warmth of the sun above the layer of straw caused the fruit to lose some of its moisture and created a more sugary, concentrated juice. The trick was determining which apples to harvest first so they had the correct balance of fruit when the time came to start milling.

"Very good, m' lord."

Henry pitched another forkful of straw over the apples, and Adam glanced at his pocket watch. On Saturday when he'd been in Mr. Hadford's study, the gentleman had suggested visiting Dunsbourne Manor today. Adam had yet to see him, and it was three o'clock already. It was possible the gentleman had changed his mind. If Miss Hadford had told her father that Adam had abandoned her at the edge of the ballroom, it was likely he would want nothing more to do with him. Of course, that was nothing when compared to the other crimes Adam was accused of committing. Adam's stomach clenched. Mr. Hadford's relatively new arrival in the neighborhood must have prevented him from hearing the rumors before now, but seeing as his daughter was obviously aware of them, it was only a matter of time. Had the tears he thought he'd seen in Miss Hadford's eyes been contrived, or did she pity him that much? Either of those possibilities left him feeling ill. He wanted to believe she had more personal integrity than to feign distress, but he had no desire for her pity either. He would push forward alone, as he had before, because the only way to fully clear his name was to sully his father's—and that was not something he was willing to do.

Leaving the ball early had probably not been the most politic course of action, but if Society held him in such low esteem, few would care. Some might even be relieved. If he were honest with himself, he could

admit that part of him—a tiny portion that resided deep within his heart—hoped Miss Hadford was sorry that he left when he did. But his practical side knew better. If she was sorry, it was merely because he had taken Emily with him.

“Begging you pardon, my lord.”

Startled out of his musing, Adam swung around. His butler stood a few yards away, his grave face and dark uniform mottled by the sunlight filtering through the leaves of the apple trees. The sight was so wholly abnormal, Adam’s first thought was that something was terribly wrong at the house.

“What is it, Thompson?”

“Mr. Hadford is here to see you, my lord.”

He had come. And Adam was fully unprepared. “Where is he now?” Someone else stepped out from the shadows of the trees. “I hope you don’t mind, Dunsbourne,” Mr. Hadford said. “It did not seem worth having you walk all the way back to the house to greet me since the orchard was my ultimate destination.”

“Not at all. I am most glad that you are come.” Relief that the gentleman still sought his association vied with embarrassment that he would be forced to entertain yet another member of the Hadford family in his work attire. “I apologize that I was not at the house when you arrived.”

“My fault entirely,” Mr. Hadford said. “I neglected to set a time with you.” He raised an eyebrow. “We did agree to Wednesday, did we not?”

“We did indeed. And you have come at the perfect hour. Henry and I have just finished building our third tump.”

“Well now.” Mr. Hadford stepped closer to view the mound of straw-covered apples more clearly. “I see that you shall have to educate me on the particulars of harvesting apples. I am unfamiliar with this practice.”

“It has been astonishing to discover how much skill is involved in cider making,” Adam said. “Henry, here, is my gardener, but underneath that weather-worn exterior, he is actually a first-class scientist.”

Henry gave a throaty chuckle. He set the pitchfork on top of the barrow and scratched his grizzled head. “Can’t say I’ve ever been called that afore.”

“Tell Mr. Hadford what we are about here, Henry,” Adam said. “I am quite sure he will agree with me by the time you are finished.”

Henry shifted uncomfortably. “Where would you have me start, m’ lord?”

“At the very beginning,” Mr. Hadford said, answering for Adam. “I confess, science was never my strong suit. You will have to explain it

all—from the variety of apples you grow to what you do with them.”
“Very well, sir.” Henry pointed to the nearest tree. “This ’ere is a King of the Pippins. We have Blenheim Oranges over there.” He pointed to his right. “An’ closest to the river, there’s the Genet Moyles.”

With a knowing smile, Adam watched Henry’s reticence evaporate as the gardener shared the distinctive qualities of each type of apple with Mr. Hadford. He outlined their plans to harvest, tump, and mill a blend of the three, explaining each procedure carefully.

Thompson disappeared as quietly as he had come, and when Henry had finished explaining the need to regularly prune the Blenheim Orange trees to produce the best fruit, all three walked to the cart shed.

Oliver was guiding Molly back across the yard to the stables.

“That is our plow horse,” Adam said. “Over the last couple of weeks, we have been training her to run the mill.”

They entered the shed, and Adam showed Mr. Hadford the mill and the cider press, explaining how the horsehair cloth would separate the layers of apple pulp in the press and allow multiple cheeses to be pressed simultaneously. Mr. Hadford eyed the equipment critically and then turned his gaze to the long row of empty barrels lining the wall.

“And you expect to fill all these?” he asked.

“That is certainly our hope.” Adam walked to the far corner of the shed and returned with a much smaller barrel and two mugs. “If you are willing to forgo crystal glasses, you may have your first taste of Dunsbourne cider.”

“By all means,” Mr. Hadford said.

Adam popped the cork and tipped the barrel, allowing the sweet-smelling liquid to slosh into the mugs. He handed a mug to his guest.

“It has taken us the best part of three years, but I believe we have come upon a perfect blend. Try it and give me your opinion.”

Mr. Hadford swirled the liquid in his mug. The heady fragrance of apples filled the shed, and though there was no need for him to do so, he lowered his nose to the mug. “Smells like apples,” he said.

A wave of nervousness coursed through Adam. He had not anticipated feeling so vulnerable. He had all but requested that Mr. Hadford critique his work. There was no reason to believe the gentleman’s remarks would be anything other than brutally honest. He waited. Mr. Hadford took a sip, swooshed the cider around in his mouth for a few seconds, and then swallowed. He eyed Adam silently and then took another drink. Adam forced himself to remain still. Mr. Hadford set his mug on the nearest barrel.

“I wish to raise the order for my personal cellar from one barrel to three.” He pointed at his empty cup. “That is by far the best cider I

have ever tasted.”

Relief, exhilaration, and optimism assaulted Adam with such force he barely knew what he was feeling.

“I am delighted, sir,” Adam said.

“As am I,” Mr. Hadford said. “Whenever you are prepared to talk business, my lord, I am ready to invest.”

Adam’s heart began to pound. Financial backing. It was something he had dreamed of, and yet, now that it was actually within his grasp, he hesitated. Could he trust himself to make the right decision?

“I appreciate the offer,” he said.

Mr. Hadford nodded. “As you know, I must be in London by week’s end. Think it over. We can discuss details upon my return.”

By then, the harvest would be well underway, and Adam would have a far better idea of what his orchard was capable of producing and what he might need to implement to increase output in the future.

“I shall consider the matter carefully,” he said.

“Very good.” Mr. Hadford started toward the open doors. “My thanks, Henry. I wish I had a man so knowledgeable as you at Charwell Park. I am ashamed to say I cannot tell you what variety of trees grows in our orchard.”

“I daresay his Lordship could tell you as well as me, sir.”

Mr. Hadford raised an eyebrow. “Is that true, Dunsbourne?”

“If I am familiar with the variety, I can likely recognize it.”

“Good heavens. I should have you come take a walk through the Charwell Park orchards with me. It is nowhere near as well maintained as yours, mind you, but I should be interested to know if we have similar apples.”

“It is quite probable,” Adam said. “I daresay they were planted within the same decade.”

“Is that so?” Mr. Hadford gave an exasperated sigh. “Inheriting a house is all very well and good until one wishes to know things that have been lost to the past.”

Adam had grown up on stories of Dunsbourne Manor. It undoubtedly gave him an advantage over a gentleman who took over an estate previously owned by an uncle.

“I would be happy to help you identify the trees in your orchard.” He thought for a moment. It would be far easier to ascertain the variety of apple with the fruit still on the branches. If he waited until Mr. Hadford returned from London, that advantage might be lost to him. “If it would not inconvenience you to have me come so soon before you leave, I could join you in the Charwell Park orchard tomorrow morning.”

“Most considerate of you, Dunsbourne.” Mr. Hadford looked pleased. “Better set a time this go-around, eh? Shall we say ten o’clock?”

“Ten o’clock,” Adam repeated. “I shall look forward to it.”

Chapter 15

PHOEBE CLOSED HER EYES AND then quickly reopened them. Nothing had changed. Did that mean she was not imagining the vision before her? Lord Dunsbourne and her father were walking together through the Charwell Park orchard, amicably conversing as though it were a casual, completely normal undertaking.

Rising to her feet from the bench near the hedge, Phoebe moved closer. She had been reluctant to go back indoors after her morning walk through the garden, so she had stopped to sit for a while. The bench at the edge of the orchard was her favorite. It was hidden from the house by the hedge that separated the wide lawn from the trees and gave her the illusion of being far from anyone else. For over half an hour, the only sounds had been the buzzing of bees, the songs of birds, and the rustle of the breeze through the leaves. Until she'd heard male voices.

"It seems to me that the vast majority of your trees are Genet Moyles." Phoebe's pulse quickened. That was Lord Dunsbourne's voice.

"The small grove of Blenheim Orange apples near the south hedge appear to be the only ones of that variety," he continued. "And this one looks to be D'Arcy Spice." The men had stopped beside a tree bent low with the weight of the fruit. "It is one of the newer apples, originating out of Essex. I would guess this one was planted more recently than the rest. It tends to be a tip-bearing tree. Once the apples are harvested, the branches will bounce back."

"By Jove, Dunsbourne, you really do know your stuff."

Phoebe recognized the admiration in her father's voice, and it warmed her heart. If her father had heard the rumors about Lord Dunsbourne, he had chosen to ignore them. He was following the very advice he had given to her: he was making his own decision about the baron. And if this interaction was anything to go by, it seemed her father's leanings were much the same as hers.

The baron laughed. It was a pleasant sound that eased the tension in Phoebe's shoulders.

"I should like to claim that my knowledge of apples and cider production is excellent, but I fear there is always something new to learn."

"As there should be," her father said. "Once we stop acquiring new knowledge, we become very boring individuals."

"I daresay you are right, sir."

Their footsteps were muffled against the ground, and it took Phoebe a moment before she realized they were walking toward her. She turned to go and then vacillated. Should she stay, or should she flee? Her indecision made the choice for her. As the gentlemen rounded the

tree, she found herself directly in her father's sights.

"Good morning, Phoebe." If her father was surprised to see her, he hid it well.

"Good morning, Father. Lord Dunsbourne." Phoebe bobbed a curtsy, willing her voice to sound calmer than her heart rate. "I had not thought to find you here."

"We are taking inventory of the trees in the orchard," her father said.

"Lord Dunsbourne here is rather an expert on the matter."

Lord Dunsbourne had yet to speak, but Phoebe felt his gaze.

She faced him. "I am glad you are come, my lord."

Surprise flickered in his eyes before he inclined his head. "I thank you, Miss Hadford. There are few places I find more pleasing than an orchard."

Her father chuckled. "I daresay you may be one of the only barons in England who would make such a claim."

The corner of Lord Dunsbourne's lips quirked upward. "I imagine you are correct, sir. What of you, Miss Hadford? What brings you to the orchard?"

"I was taking a walk, my lord, and stopped to sit on the bench beneath the apple tree for a spell."

"Both my daughters are rather fond of that old bench," her father said. Phoebe gave him an appreciative smile. Anything that he might say to prevent Lord Dunsbourne from believing she had purposely come here to spy on him was welcome.

"I can see why. It is very nicely situated."

There was a rustle of leaves, and a footman appeared through the nearby gap in the hedge. "Pardon me, Mr. Hadford," he said with a bow. "Gresham asked that I inform you that your carriage is ready."

Her father pulled out his pocket watch and glanced at it. "Good heavens. Is it that time already?" He offered the baron an apologetic look. "Forgive me, Dunsbourne, I had not intended to monopolize your entire morning."

"And I have no wish to delay your departure. Please feel free to return to the house right away. I can make my own way to the stables to retrieve my horse."

Phoebe read the conflict on her father's face as the need to start his journey warred with his desire to extend every courtesy to his guest.

"Go ahead, Father," she said. "There is no need for Lord Dunsbourne to return to the stables alone. I can walk back to the house that way."

Her father's lack of disagreement confirmed that he considered his immediate departure to be necessary.

"Thank you, my dear." He leaned closer and kissed her cheek. "I shall see you within the fortnight."

"Travel safely, Father."

Her father bowed to Lord Dunsbourne. "Best wishes with your apple harvest, my lord. I look forward to our discussion upon my return." Lord Dunsbourne inclined his head. "Until then, Mr. Hadford." Phoebe followed her father through the gap in the hedge, and with mounting anxiety, she watched him march briskly across the lawn toward the front of the house. What had she been thinking? Her offer to walk with Lord Dunsbourne had been the height of foolishness. Without her father, there would be no buffer against the baron's disregard. No matter that they were in plain sight should anyone care to look out of one of the house's many windows, she had never felt so defenseless.

They started across the grass, the silence between them growing with each step.

"It was wrong of me to leave you at the edge of the dance floor on Saturday." Lord Dunsbourne's voice was low. "You have my sincere apologies."

If the tension in his face was any indication, this was as difficult for him as it was for her.

"Your actions were understandable. They were caused by my thoughtlessness. It is I who should be apologizing."

"You should never apologize for telling the truth, Miss Hadford."

"I may have been reporting what was said about you, but it was not the truth."

He stopped and stared at her. "You truly believe that?"

She met his shocked expression with one of conviction. "Completely."

He searched her eyes. She did not waver. Slowly, his smile appeared, and he offered her his arm. It was Phoebe's turn to smile. She placed her hand upon his sleeve, and they started toward the stables again.

"I saw Mr. Derrick Webb yesterday," she said. "He was driving a curricule that he won in a card game."

"It does not surprise me."

Phoebe glanced at him. "It does not?"

"Derrick Webb has been playing games of chance for as long as I have known him."

"How long is that?"

"Since childhood. We grew up in the same neighborhood and attended the same schools." He paused. "As far as I can tell, the only new development in his behavior is that he is choosing to conceal his gambling more now. During our school days, he made no effort to hide his reputation as the luckiest student at Eton. High-stakes poker was his game of choice."

Phoebe remained quiet, her thoughts tumbling over each other as she considered Mr. Webb's hypocrisy.

"How could he say such things about you when he is far more

culpable of wrongdoing?"

"He may not consider his bent toward gambling as reprehensible," Lord Dunsbourne said. "As a pupil, he was excessively proud of his winning streaks."

Phoebe frowned. "By pointing his finger at you, he deflected attention from himself. Mr. Webb is not one to do that unless he has good reason. Winning streaks do not last forever. Perhaps things have not been going so well for him recently."

"With the exception of a new curricule," Lord Dunsbourne said dryly.

"True." She suppressed a shudder at the memory of Mr. Webb's insistent invitation that she ride with him. "He seemed excessively proud of it."

"So I imagine."

Their conversation lapsed into silence again, but this time, the discomfort was gone. They approached the stables, and Lord Dunsbourne slowed his steps. Phoebe lowered her hand from his arm.

"I am most appreciative of your faith in my character, Miss Hadford. Particularly as I have given you no reason to be so inclined." He gazed off into the distance as though seeing something no one else could see.

"I am not in a position to share a great deal with you, but this much I will say: I have never been—nor will I ever become—a heavy drinker or a gambler."

Phoebe swallowed the lump in her throat. "If I may beg to differ, my lord. I believe that in one sentence, you have shared more with me than most gentlemen would ever willingly assert."

He offered her a small smile. "Then we are even."

Memory of her awful declaration of the rumors attached to him washed over her, leaving her face warm and her heart sick.

"Forgive me," she whispered.

"As I told you before, there is nothing to forgive. I pressed you for information. You complied."

Phoebe chewed her lip. "I have written to Emily. I . . . I did not want to lose her friendship, even if I had lost yours, and I hoped that perhaps we could continue to . . ." The amusement in his eyes caught her off guard, and her words petered out.

"Were we friends, Miss Hadford?"

If possible, the warmth in her cheeks redoubled. "That was presumptuous," she said.

"I disagree. It was very generous."

Phoebe took an uneasy breath. Her face surely resembled one of Lord Dunsbourne's reddest apples by now, but there was nothing more to be done than to push on. "Then I hope you will allow me to visit your sister on occasion."

He inclined his head. "You are welcome at Dunsbourne Manor

anytime, Miss Hadford.”

Phoebe’s relief was manifest in an instant smile. “Thank you, my lord.”

“The apple harvest begins in earnest tomorrow, so I will likely be away from the house when you come. I apologize ahead of time.”

She shook her head. “I think we have both exhausted our need to apologize to each other.”

“Fair enough.” The sound of a carriage rumbling down the drive reached them, and he stepped toward the stable doors. “Good day, Miss Hadford.”

“Good day, my lord.”

Freddie was beginning to think Bertrand was a permanent fixture at White's. No matter what time of day Freddie stopped by, the old codger was sitting in the same chair with a newspaper in his hand and a glass of brandy at his side. Freddie usually avoided people who could place him at a certain location on a regular basis. Flitting in and out of establishments without being noticed was one of his specialties. But Bertrand was different. He could be used.

"Good day, my lord." Freddie greeted him with a smile.

"Wilmott. Nice to see you. Take a seat."

The chair across from Bertrand was starting to feel like his own.

"What do we have to complain about today?" Freddie asked, pointing to the viscount's newspaper.

"All the fuss being made over William Brodie going to trial in Edinburgh." He shook his head, causing his white wig to shift. "Stuff and nonsense. There are far more important things to worry about."

"Such as?"

"Well, the triple alliance between the Brits, Prussia, and the Dutch Republic, of course."

"Of course." Freddie mentally filed away that piece of information. Alliances tended to influence investments—particularly if they led to war.

"Those Russians simply cannot be trusted."

"Absolutely not." Freddie struck a pensive pose. "The Dutch Republic though. A bit weak, wouldn't you say?" It was complete gibberish, but Bertrand did not seem to care or know better.

"Undoubtedly. But they would never admit to it."

"That friend of yours—Mr. Hadford, I think his name was—he would be anxious to hear your opinion of the Dutch. He seemed quite keen on investing over there."

"Yes, quite." The viscount frowned. "Haven't seen him for a bit though. He lives in Berkshire, you see. Only comes into Town occasionally."

Freddie forced a smile even as his frustration mounted. The forged letter supposedly from Willem den Haan was in his pocket. He simply needed Hadford to make an appearance at White's for his plan to roll forward. He had waited long enough already. His finances were depleting, and he was more than ready to replenish them.

"Any idea when he might be back?"

"It would not surprise me at all if he showed up in the next week or two." Bertrand flipped the newspaper over and studied another article. "Another ship is due in from the West Indies, and Hadford quite often arrives when they unload cargo at the dock."

Freddie mulled this new information, his irritation ebbing. A man with so many business interests was undoubtedly worth the wait. A

few more strategically placed forged notes would enable him to get by until Hadford showed up. But at his first sighting of the gentleman, Freddie would make his move.

Chapter 16

ADAM STOOD WITH HIS HANDS on his hips and his head back. He could barely see Weston through the apple tree's dense foliage. The village boy was as agile as a monkey and had no fear of climbing to the top of the trees to harvest the apples. Already this morning, he had filled four large baskets with the crop from this tree.

"Watch yourself up there, lad. You can shake down the ones that are too hard to reach."

"Now, m' lord?"

Adam took three large paces to his right. "Now."

One of the top branches began to quake, and apples tumbled to the ground. Adam flinched as they bounced. The bruising would be significant, but thankfully, that mattered little in the juice extraction process.

"I think that's all of 'em, m' lord." Weston's voice was accompanied by a loud rustling, and moments later, his thin face appeared through the leaves.

"Excellent," Adam said. "Come on down and gather these. We shall build a new tump near the shed. Henry should have removed the old one by now."

The rustling increased, and soon Weston's legs appeared on the lowest branch. Adam pulled out his pocket watch, glanced at it, and frowned. The other two village boys should have been here by now. Weston, Isaac, and Duncan had been working in the orchard for a week, and although they had made significant inroads into bringing in the crop, there was still a great deal to be done.

Weston jumped to the ground and began collecting the dropped apples. With the boy safely out of the tree, Adam started back toward the shed. If Isaac and Duncan were not there, Henry would need his help loading the mill with the apples from their first tump.

Adam heard the barrow's squeaky wheels before he reached the edge of the trees. Henry was pushing the small handcart from the shed to the tump. He had already pulled back the layer of straw to expose the apples beneath, and a glance at the diminished pile told Adam this was not Henry's first load.

"Any sign of our workers?" Adam asked.

His gardener looked up from his bent position over the apples. "Not that I've seen." He waved his gnarled hand over the fruit in a vain attempt to whoosh away the circling bees. "Don't know what's keepin' 'em. They both knew we were loadin' the mill today."

Adam looked toward the house. There was no sign of anyone approaching.

"Very well. We shall make do without them for the time being." He

joined Henry at the barrow and began loading apples into it. "We'll be needin' Oliver to bring out Molly after this load's delivered, m' lord."

Adam nodded even as his anxiety inched upward. This would be Molly's first time pulling the millstone with a trough full of fruit beneath. And it would be their first indication of whether all her practice sessions had been worth Oliver's time.

Pushing his doubts aside, Adam continued piling applies into the barrow and allowed his thoughts to turn to Miss Hadford. She had been at the forefront of his mind since their meeting at the Charwell Park orchard. No. She had been at the forefront of his mind far longer than that, but his conversation with her there had offered him new hope. That she was willing to believe the best of him despite all opinions to the contrary still astounded him. And it made him wish that he could exhibit similar confidence in someone outside of his sister and his small circle of loyal servants. The thought of placing his trust in a relative stranger was unnerving at best, and yet, if anyone could help him afford such a change, perhaps it was Miss Hadford. "That should do it, m' lord."

With a start, Adam realized that the barrow was near to overflowing and Henry was standing, holding the handles.

Brushing the dust off his hands, Adam rose to his feet. "I'll have Oliver bring Molly over, then."

Henry nodded. "The first two loads are washed an' ready. It won't take long to put this batch through the water bath."

"Very well."

Henry started the barrow in motion toward the shed. The wheels squealed in protest, but Adam barely noticed. He was already en route to the stables.

Oliver had the plow horse ready in minutes, and by the time he and Adam walked her over to the cart shed, Henry had filled the mill's trough with washed apples and had tipped the apples from the barrow into the water bath. Molly sniffed the air as Oliver attached her harness to the mill pole.

"Do you smell them apples, Molly?" Oliver cinched the last strap and slapped her rump affectionately. "I daresay you can 'ave one if you do yer job well today."

Adam stood beside the water barrel, his arms folded, watching.

"Whenever you are ready, Oliver," he said.

Oliver clicked his tongue and tugged on the harness. Molly took a step forward. The millstone shifted.

"Come on, girl." Oliver tugged a little harder, and Molly moved another two steps. "That's it."

Slowly, the wheel began to move. A crunching sound filled the shed as

the stone smashed the apples beneath it. Molly strained, building up momentum until she reached a gentle walk, and the rich scent of sun-warmed apples filled the room.

Oliver grinned. "She's got it, m' lord."

"I reckon she's just chasin' that smell," Henry said.

Adam chuckled and picked up the long stick leaning against the wall.

"You may be right, but whatever is motivating her, let us hope it continues."

Moving closer to the mill, he eyed the pulverized fruit. When Molly had made a couple more circuits, he reached over and used the stick to knock some of the extra apples piled onto the central pier into the trough. The millstone continued to grind. Adam continued to watch. "Water, if you please, Henry," Adam said.

The old gardener appeared at his side with a pitcher and poured the water within onto the crushed fruit. Before long, the apple's pale-colored flesh turned brown, and the aroma intensified. Adam stretched out his arm and took a fistful of the pulp. He squeezed and released. It retained its shape.

"It looks like we are ready to create the first cheese, gentlemen," he said.

The sound of someone clearing his throat drew Adam's attention to the door. Thompson stood silhouetted in the doorway.

"I beg your pardon, my lord. A message just came for you."

Adam waited, expecting to be handed a letter. Instead, the butler cleared his throat again. "A young boy stopped at the house to inform you that Isaac and Duncan were requested in Hereford earlier than they'd thought. They left first thing this morning."

Adam's heart sank. He had counted on having the extra help for at least another week. Isaac and Duncan had known exactly what to do in the orchard. Young Weston may be a monkey in the trees, but the two older boys had been workhorses, hauling the apples into tumps at record speeds.

"Can we find someone else?" He turned to Henry. "Did you ask around at the village?"

"I did, m' lord. No one else came forward."

"No one?" Adam did not hide his skepticism. "Are there truly no young men in need of a little extra money in all of High Brodmere?"

Henry shuffled his feet awkwardly. "That I can't tell you, m' lord. Alls I know is that fer some no-account reason, none of 'em want to work at Dunsbourne Manor."

Adam stared at him, a pit forming in his stomach. "How did you come to hire Duncan and Isaac?" he asked. "The truth, Henry." He was prepared this time. At least, he told himself he was.

"I begged 'em, m' lord. 'Cos I knew they'd need no real trainin'."

“And Weston?”

“He’s my sister’s grandson, m’ lord. He were excited fer the opportunity t’ make a few shillin’s.”

Adam ran his sticky fingers through his hair. How had he only now discovered this blight on his name if it had spread to every layer of Society in the local community? He took a deep breath. There was nothing to be done about it now. He had apples to harvest—and that was going to be nigh impossible with so few hands.

“Then we shall simply have to make do as we are.”

“We’ll manage, m’ lord. Just you watch,” Henry said.

Adam’s expression was grim. “We must.”

After waiting over a week for her letter to reach Emily and for her friend's eager response to arrive back at Charwell Park, Phoebe had accepted Emily's invitation to join her for luncheon. She had taken the carriage to Dunsbourne Manor the very next day, but if Miss Glover's dour expression upon seeing her was any indication, the older lady was not nearly as pleased by the young ladies' reunion as Phoebe and Emily. Thankfully, Miss Glover's stony silence had not been enough to prevent them from enjoying a lovely meal, and afterward, they had relocated to the drawing room.

Phoebe and Emily were studying a pictorial book full of sketches of wildlife indigenous to India when a plump, white-haired lady wearing a mobcap and an enormous apron knocked on the door.

"Begging your pardon, miss." The servant, whom Phoebe assumed was the cook, bobbed a curtsy. "I was just wondering if you'd heard anything from Lord Dunsbourne about his luncheon."

"His luncheon?" Emily said.

"Yes, miss. Thompson mentioned that they might be a bit short-handed in the orchard today. And I wondered if perhaps his Lordship would prefer to have some food taken down to him." Concern filled her eyes. "I'd hate to see him go without nourishment all day long."

"Has he not come in yet today?" Emily said.

"No, miss."

"Not even for breakfast?"

"No, miss."

Cook's concern became Emily's. "If you would be so good as to pack him a basket, Miss Hadford and I will gladly walk it down to him."

She turned to Phoebe. "You would not mind, would you?"

"Not at all," Phoebe said, even as butterflies started dancing in her stomach. No matter the situation, it seemed that she was never fully prepared to see Lord Dunsbourne.

"Thank you, miss. I shall gather some victuals right away."

Cook disappeared, and Emily glanced at Miss Glover. The older lady was dozing in the chair closest to the fire.

"I think perhaps it is best if we let Miss Glover rest," Emily said.

Phoebe nodded, hoping her relief was not too evident. Emily had told her that Miss Glover usually took a nap in the afternoon, but it had taken a while for the elderly lady to succumb to sleep today. She had obviously wished to stay alert to keep a firm eye on Phoebe and Emily; her disapproval of their friendship was as palpable as it was perplexing.

Emily rose and beckoned Phoebe to follow. They walked quietly out of the room and into the vast main hall. The entrance to the beautiful home was empty, and Phoebe was reminded once again of the lack of servants at the manor. No wonder Emily had volunteered to do a job

better suited for a footman.

They did not have to wait long before Cook arrived carrying a basket in each hand.

"I put in enough for Henry and Oliver—and the boys, too, if they came without," Cook said.

Emily took the baskets from her and passed one to Phoebe. "Thank you. That was very thoughtful."

"Well, we can't have his Lordship losing his strength now, can we? Not when he needs it the most."

"True. And I am sure Henry and Oliver require nourishment just as much."

"I daresay," Cook said. "But I haven't been watchin' out for them since they were knee-high." She pointed to the basket Emily held. "There's some of the baron's favorite biscuits in that one. Make sure he knows." Phoebe bit her lip to hide her smile. Although Miss Glover may be prickly, Cook was all but mothering Lord Dunsbourne.

"I will tell him," Emily said.

Cook hurried back to the kitchen, and Emily and Phoebe donned their bonnets and headed outside with the food baskets. They exited the manor through the front door and followed the path to the back of the house and the orchard.

The grinding of the apple mill filled the air, and by unspoken agreement, the two young ladies headed toward the cart shed. They saw no one until they reached the entrance. There, they stopped. The light was dimmer inside, but the open doors let in sufficient light to see the plow horse plodding around the circular mill. Oliver stood nearby, monitoring Molly and the apples in the trough. Across from him, Lord Dunsbourne was turning the wheel of a large apple press. The baron had discarded his jacket and cravat; they lay across the top of a barrel in the corner. His shirt was stained, and his boots were caked with mud and straw. His hair fell loose across his forehead, and a streak of dirt marred his cheek. As Phoebe watched, he cranked the wheel one more time, grunting at the exertion and causing the muscles in his arms and across his broad shoulder to bulge. The butterflies in her stomach spun into a whirling dervish. She had long admired well-dressed gentlemen. Currently, Lord Dunsbourne was quite the opposite. And yet, no one had ever appeared so handsome. Oliver saw them first.

"My lord," he called over the sound of the mill.

Lord Dunsbourne looked up, and Oliver pointed to the doorway.

The baron released the wheel immediately. Brushing his hands on his breeches, he crossed the shed toward them. "Emily. Miss Hadford. What are you doing here?"

"We brought food," Emily said, raising her basket so he could see.

“Cook was worried about you.”

He ran his sleeve across his forehead. “What time is it?”

“Going on four o’clock.”

His shocked expression told all. He had not stopped long enough to check his pocket watch, let alone register that he might be hungry.

“We brought enough for Henry, Oliver, and the boys,” Emily said.

“Oliver,” the baron called. “Let Molly rest for a minute. Miss Norton and Miss Hadford have brought us something to eat.”

The grinding slowed to a halt, and the shed became unnaturally quiet. Oliver filled a bucket with water and offered it to Molly before joining them near the door. Phoebe pulled back the cloth covering on her basket to reveal cheese and a loaf of fresh bread cut into thick slices. She glanced at Emily’s basket. It contained half a dozen pork pies and a stack of the promised biscuits. Lord Dunsbourne reached for a pie. Oliver followed his example.

“Thank you, kindly, Miss Norton, Miss Hadford,” Oliver said with a nod.

“Cook is the one who deserves all the credit,” Emily said. “We are merely the couriers.” She paused. “Where are Henry and the boys?”

“Henry and Weston are in the orchard,” Lord Dunsbourne said. “They are picking and creating tumps as fast as they can.”

“What about the others?”

“They are gone.”

“Gone?” Emily wrinkled her brow. “Gone where?”

“To Hereford,” Lord Dunsbourne said with a frustrated sigh. “They left this morning.”

“But you are nowhere near finished.”

He gazed out at the orchard on the other side of the yard. “I know. That is why we have been pushing so hard today. There must be at least two of us working in the shed, but with only two sets of hands in the orchard, we will be hard-pressed to bring in all the apples and process them before the weather turns.”

“Can you not hire new workers to replace the ones you lost?” Phoebe asked.

His eyes met hers for the first time since she’d arrived. She saw the anxiety there—along with something else she could not identify.

“It seems that no matter the wage, no one in the village wishes to work at Dunsbourne Manor,” he said.

Phoebe’s breath caught. Could the rumor about Lord Dunsbourne that had run unchecked for so many years have affected the local people as deeply as it had the gentry?

“How long has this been an issue?” she asked.

“That I cannot tell you,” the baron said grimly. “This is the first time I have attempted to hire anyone since my father’s passing.”

"I will happily work in the orchard," Emily said.

Lord Dunsbourne swung back to her. "You cannot do that, Emily."

"Whyever not?"

"You are a lady."

"And you are a gentleman," she countered. "That has not stopped you from working as hard as any laborer."

Lord Dunsbourne glanced at his clothing, his look of chagrin indicating his sudden awareness of his appearance.

"Indeed," he said. "And look at me. This is the consequence."

"Those are merely your clothes, my lord," Phoebe said. "They can be changed easily enough. The fortitude needed to push on through difficulties, however, is much more lasting and significant."

He stared at her. "I was under the impression that fine clothing is of utmost importance to you, Miss Hadford."

Phoebe felt her cheeks pink. "I believe it fair to say that although I have always enjoyed following fashion trends, that particular interest is no greater than my desire to associate with upright people.

Unfortunately, as the wearing of fine clothing does not necessarily guarantee good character, I prefer to focus my attention on the latter."

Lord Dunsbourne seemed momentarily dumbstruck. Given what she wished to say next, it was the best state she could hope for. "I shall wear something more suitable than my current gown when I come to pick apples tomorrow."

The baron's tongue loosed immediately. "Absolutely not."

She feigned misunderstanding. "You wish me to pick in this gown?"

"Of course not." His eyes flashed dangerously. "You will not pick Dunsbourne apples in that gown or any other."

"You have already admitted to needing assistance. I can help."

"Only a couple of weeks ago, you told me to spend as much time as I would like in the orchard," Emily said. "I have decided to spend the entire day there tomorrow."

"And I shall be with Emily."

If Phoebe had not wanted to win this battle so desperately, she would have felt sorry for Lord Dunsbourne. Like it or not, the beleaguered baron was outnumbered.

"Emily may be in the orchard because she is part of this family."

"And I shall be there because I am a friend."

He looked at her then. They were several feet apart, but emotion pulsed between them.

"Society will not approve if you do this." His voice was low.

"My conscience will not forgive me if I do not."

Chapter 17

PHOEBE WENT THROUGH HER WARDROBE for the second time before dropping onto her bed in despair. How was it possible that she could own so many gowns and yet not have a single one suitable for apple picking? Even her oldest gowns were inappropriate. If they were not ornamented with so much lace that her sleeves would catch on branches, they were cinched so tightly at the waist as to prevent her from bending over. She had layers and layers of petticoats without a practical skirt amongst them.

"It is useless, Lucy. The only sensible article of clothing I own is my shift."

"What exactly were you hoping for, miss?"

"I don't know," Phoebe said miserably. "Something that would enable me to move without hindrance. Something similar to your gown."

Lucy studied her simple, striped, wool dress. "I have one other just like this, miss. Perhaps you could use it. You're a mite taller than me, but we're of a similar build." She shrugged. "We could move the pinning if we need to."

Phoebe seized her maid's hands. "You really would not mind?"

"No, miss. As long as Mrs. Wilson don't need me to clean the fireplaces, I should be able to keep this one clean enough to make do until you have the other back to me."

"I shall buy you a new one as payment for the loan," Phoebe said. It was ridiculous that she owned more gowns than she could count and Lucy owned only two.

"No, miss. I wouldn't want you to do that. Having my old one back when you've finished with it will be sufficient."

"Please let me do this for you, Lucy." Phoebe squeezed her maid's hands before releasing them. "You know full well how much I enjoy shopping for new clothes. It will give me great pleasure to choose something for you."

Lucy twisted the corner of her apron between her fingers. "Nothing fancy. Plain wool is best."

"Of course. What color would you like?"

"Blue," Lucy said without hesitation. "Like a robin's egg."

Phoebe smiled. "I shall see to it first thing next week. The gown you lend me will give the village seamstress the measurements she needs."

"Thank you, miss. I'm sure it will be the nicest dress I've ever had."

She smiled shyly. "Would you like me to fetch my clothes now?"

"If you would." Phoebe had never considered her mother's penchant for rising late to be a blessing, but today, it was going to work in her favor. "I should like to be on my way within the half hour."

"Very good, miss." Lucy disappeared into the passageway.

According to the clock on the mantel, she was back—albeit slightly out of breath—four minutes later.

“Here you go. It’s not much, especially after what you’re used to, but it might do the job.” She set the simple garment on the bed. It was a striped, brown-and-white wool gown with inverted back pleats to shape the waist and a dark-colored linen petticoat beneath. “I brought my extra apron and linen kerchief in case you were wanting those as well.”

“Lucy, you are an angel,” Phoebe said. “This will be perfect. Will you help me put it on, and we shall see if any of the pins will need to be adjusted?”

The gown fit. It was about two inches too short, but in every other way, it was perfect.

Phoebe turned from the looking glass to face her maid. “What do you think?”

Lucy pressed her hand to her mouth to stifle a fit of the giggles. “Oh, miss. You do look peculiar.”

“Peculiar because my ankles are showing, or peculiar because I look like a maid?”

Lucy shook her head. “Neither of those things, miss. It’s only that it don’t matter what you wear; you could never pass as a servant. You are too good for my clothes.”

“That is where you are wrong, Lucy. It has taken me until today to consider being half as generous as you.” She reached for her gloves and bonnet. “Now, let us see if I can escape the house without anyone noticing my unusual attire.”

Although the day promised to be warm and sunny, the morning chill necessitated a cloak. The covering hid the better part of Phoebe’s clothing and enabled her to leave the house and request her mare at the stables with no one the wiser. If the stableboy who helped her mount noticed her gown, he kept his silence, and before long, Phoebe was riding across the fields that separated Charwell Park from Dunsbourne Manor.

Oliver was in the stable when Phoebe arrived, and he took charge of her horse right away.

“Is Lord Dunsbourne in the cart shed already this morning?” she asked.

“I believe so, miss. He’s usually the first one there.”

“What of Miss Norton?”

Oliver scratched his head. “Can’t say that I’ve seen ’er today. Course, I haven’t been much farther than the stables yet.”

From somewhere across the meadow, a cock crowed—a reminder that it was still early. Opting to try the house first, Phoebe walked the path to the front door and knocked.

Thompson answered. "Good day, Miss Hadford," he said with a bow. "Good day, Thompson. Is Miss Norton available?" She noted the look of hesitancy on the butler's face. "I realize that it is far too early for a social call, but I believe she is expecting me."

"Phoebe! You are here!" Emily's voice rang out from the staircase, and she hurried down the last few stairs to join her.

Thompson stood aside, and Phoebe entered the main hall to greet her friend. Emily was dressed in a plain, light-blue gown and had her bonnet and gloves in hand.

"Are you ready?"

"Of course," Phoebe said.

Emily linked her arm through Phoebe's. "Thank you for doing this."

"It will be a new adventure, and new adventures do not come along often enough."

Emily pursed her lips. "Perhaps I could have used that argument with Miss Glover." She thought for a moment and shook her head. "No. I do not think it would have won her over any more than me telling her that I wished to exercise. She is not overly fond of exercise or adventures."

"You could tell her you are outdoors to study nature," Phoebe suggested. She was trying not to think about how many insects they would likely encounter during today's endeavor; she had no doubt they existed in abundance in the orchard.

Emily beamed. "I shall tell her exactly that when she joins us later this morning."

Phoebe attempted to hide her dismay. Having Miss Glover nearby would be akin to having a black raincloud hanging over them. But she could not deny that it was another set of hands in the orchard, and that certainly had priority over her own contentment. She wished she could have brought Lucy to help—or better yet, a footman or two—but taking Charwell Park servants from their duties at home would have required offering her mother a full explanation of what she was about at Dunsbourne Manor. Given her mother's current wariness concerning the baron's character, she would likely have disallowed all assistance—especially Phoebe's.

They exited the house and cut across the back lawn to the orchard. Voices reached them through the trees. Emily veered right, leading Phoebe toward the sound. They wove through the apple trees until they spotted Henry talking to a branch.

"This one and then the three next to it," he said. "We need all these King of the Pippins in tumps by the end of the day."

"Yes, sir."

A pair of spindly legs appeared between the leaves. It seemed that the gardener was not talking to the tree after all.

“Good morning, Henry,” Emily said.

The old man looked up, and above his head, the branches swayed wildly. Apples rained down, and Henry took three hurried steps back. “Watch yerself, Weston,” he called. “Come down ’ere and talk to the ladies.”

Seconds later, a small boy dropped out of the tree. “Sorry ’bout the apples, Uncle Henry. I didn’t mean fer them to come down on yer head like that. I was jus’ tryin’ to get meself on the ground.”

“You’re goin’ to have to be more careful now that there are other people around,” Henry said. He placed his hand on the boy’s shoulder and turned him to face Emily and Phoebe. “This ’ere is Miss Norton and Miss Hadford. They’re goin’ to be helpin’ gather the apples today. Ladies, this is my sister’s grandson, Weston.”

“Mornin’, Miss Norton and Miss Hadford.” Weston bowed his tussled head.

“Good morning, Weston,” Emily said.

“Good morning, Weston.” Phoebe smiled at the boy. “It seems to me that you must be very good at scaling trees.”

Weston’s ears turned red, but he looked rather pleased at her comment.

“E is that, Miss Hadford,” Henry said. “I’ve just been tellin’ ’im that ’is job today is to climb up these trees and get the apples down to you ladies. If you’d be good enough to load them into the baskets or the barrow, I’ll haul them into the tumps. The sooner we get these apples sweetenin’ up in the sun, the better.”

“Very well.” Phoebe picked up a large basket sitting beneath a nearby tree. “Up you go again, Weston.”

The boy did not need a second invitation. He was up the tree as fast as a squirrel.

“Watch fer people down below this time,” Henry called as the boy disappeared between the branches.

“Yes, sir.” Weston’s response was punctuated by the thud of another apple hitting the ground.

Adam needed to get out of the shed. He'd been crushing apples and pressing pulp for hours. Everything smelled of apples, and he had all but forgotten what it felt like to breathe fresh air.

"Take a break, Oliver," he called over the grind of the mill. "And let Molly rest for a bit. I am going out to the orchard to check on things there. I shall send Henry back to take my place."

"Very good, m' lord." Oliver was already slowing Molly's steady walk to a slow plod.

Adam rinsed his sticky hands in a bucket of water and walked outside to shake them dry. The sun was shining, and a light breeze tugged at his hair. Knowing that Henry was hoping to load the last of the King of the Pippins into tumps today, Adam started toward that part of the orchard.

An unfamiliar zing of anticipation shot through him. When he'd arisen this morning, he had all but decided that Miss Hadford's offer to work in the orchard would come to naught, but when Thompson showed up with a midday repast, he had informed Adam that Miss Hadford had, indeed, arrived earlier and that she and Emily had been in the orchard ever since.

He heard Emily's laughter before he saw them. The sound lightened his heart and made him smile. No matter what Miss Glover thought, Miss Hadford had opened the door on the joyful portion of his sister's personality, and he was immensely grateful. He was only now realizing how limiting it had been for Emily to have an elderly spinster and an antisocial older brother as her only companions. Up until the day Miss Hadford had entered Dunsbourne Manor, his sister had been far too serious for her age.

He followed the voices, slowing when he saw the flicker of clothing through the trees.

"Those are the last of 'em from this tree, Miss Hadford." Weston's voice rang from somewhere above.

"Nicely done, Weston. Did you hear that, Henry? We are ready to move on to the next tree."

The barrow's squeaky wheels gave away the gardener's approach.

"That's grand. One more load, and I reckon the tump'll be ready for straw."

"Come along, Weston," Emily said. "Let us see how many we can gather before Henry and Miss Hadford fill the barrow."

Adam stepped into the small clearing in time to see Weston scramble down one tree and run for the next. Emily was close behind him. To his surprise, Miss Glover was standing nearby, a basket in hand. She was watching Weston's rapid ascent up the tree trunk with a mixture of incredulity and terror. At his right, Henry was supervising the transfer of a large basket of apples into the barrow. The young woman

at his side wore the simple gown and apron of a maid, but her golden hair gave away her identity.

"I will take the barrow this time, Henry," Adam said, stepping up beside the older man. He heard Miss Hadford catch her breath, but he did not look at her.

"Afternoon, Lord Dunsbourne," Henry said. "Didn't hear you come over the ruckus of all these apples rollin'." He handed the basket back to Miss Hadford. "We're moving right along, m' lord. This load'll do it fer the next tump, and I reckon we only 'ave one an' a half more rows of the King of the Pippin trees, an' then we can start on the Genet Moyle."

"I'm glad to hear it." Adam raised the barrow handles. "If you would be willing to take my place in the shed, I shall top off the tump with these and will apply the layer of straw."

"Right you are, m' lord." He bobbed his head. "Miss Hadford 'ere can show you where the tump's located."

Henry shuffled off, and Adam turned to Miss Hadford for the first time.

"You came," he said.

"Of course. I told you I would."

He knew she could have no idea how much those simple words meant to him.

"How have you managed?"

"Very well." She placed her hand on her back and stretched slightly. "I daresay I shall be a little uncomfortable tomorrow from all the bending Emily and I have been doing, but I have enjoyed being here." He raised a questioning eyebrow, and she smiled.

"You may not believe me, but I tell you the truth. It has been wonderful to feel that I am doing something worthwhile." Her blue eyes sparkled. "I realize that it might come as a surprise to know that the same cannot be said for taking afternoon tea with Mother's friends."

He chuckled. "A surprise indeed." He inclined his head toward the gap between the trees. "Which way to the tump?"

Miss Hadford led him to the edge of the orchard, where a large pile of apples lay exposed to the sun.

Adam whistled through his teeth at the size of the mound. "You have done well."

"This is actually our second tump. The other one is over there." She pointed to a straw-covered mound several yards away.

Adam heard the pride in her voice and smiled. "If I did not know better, I would say you rather enjoy wearing the attire of a maid and working for a living."

For the first time since he'd known her, she appeared self-conscious.

She ran her hands down the serviceable gown and raised her chin.

“Perhaps I should note that the same people who would be amused to hear of my attire today would be just as amused by yours.”

“You misunderstand me, Miss Hadford. I applaud your choice of dress. However, if you believe that our good neighbors would be as interested in knowing that Lord Dunsbourne takes off his jacket and cravat to work in the orchard as they would be to know that the always-impeccably-turned-out Miss Hadford wore a maid’s dress that showed a significant amount of her very shapely legs, you are terribly mistaken.”

She gasped and turned a becoming shade of pink. “Lord Dunsbourne, that was most ungentlemanly.”

He bit his lip to prevent a grin. She was right, heaven help him. But the teasing words had slipped out before he could prevent them. As beautiful as she was in her finery, she was even more attractive now—wearing her maid’s short gown and an apple leaf stuck in one of the curls beneath her straw bonnet.

“Forgive me, Miss Hadford. It was wrong of me. My sister will tell you that I tease her more than I should.”

She eyed him warily. “I would not have thought you were a man who made light of things often, my lord.”

Memories of the laughter and pranks he had known in his youth assailed him. They were followed by a wave of regret. Emily was not the only one who had become too serious.

“I confess, over the last few years, I have allowed the weight of my responsibilities to quench my humor more than I should.” He stared at the pile of apples before him. “Only recently have I come to realize that my mood has, in turn, negatively affected my sister.” This confession was as difficult as it was necessary. “I heard Emily laugh as I approached you in the orchard. It was a welcome sound, and I believe I have you to thank for it. It gives me hope that it is not too late for her to experience more happiness in life.”

“If I may venture an opinion, my lord?”

“By all means.”

“No matter what has happened in your past, it is not too late for you to experience more happiness either.”

He sensed her sincerity, but whether she knew it or not, the specter of Freddie Payne—what he had done and was still free to do—hung between them.

“It is a nice thought, but I believe I am too out of practice to reclaim it now.”

She met his eyes, and he could not look away. “If it would help you remember,” she said quietly, “you may tease me occasionally—whilst we are in the orchard.”

More touched than he cared to admit, he reached for an apple in the barrow. "What about a race?" he said. "The first person to unload thirty apples from the barrow onto the tump can tease the other for the rest of the day."

A new glint—one that looked suspiciously like mischief—entered Miss Hadford's eyes. "Agreed."

Adam bent over his side of the barrow; Miss Hadford reached for hers. "Ready, steady, go!" Adam shouted.

Adam grabbed two apples in each hand. Miss Hadford skirted the barrow and reached for the handles. In one swift movement, she pushed it to the edge of the tump and tipped it forward. Apples rolled onto the mound with wild abandon.

"I win!" she cried. "And I even took care of your thirty as well."

Adam took one look at her gleeful expression and started to laugh. Perhaps there was something to this remarkable young lady's suggestion after all.

Chapter 18

"IT'S TIME, MISS HADFORD." LUCY'S voice cut through Phoebe's dreams, and she stirred.

Surely she had set her head upon her pillow only five minutes before. It could not possibly be morning already.

"Half an hour more, Lucy," she mumbled. "Give me half an hour more."

"Very good, miss."

The door closed behind her maid, and what seemed to be one minute later, it reopened.

"It's been half an hour, miss."

This time, Lucy opened the curtains. Phoebe groaned, instinctively raising her arm over her eyes. The simple movement triggered such burning pain, she was instantly thrust into full consciousness. Memory came flooding back. Picking apples from the trees and off the ground, laughing with Emily over Weston's antics, ignoring Miss Glover's unfriendliness, and coaxing a smile or two out of Lord Dunsbourne. The baron had been a good sport over her tipping of the apple barrow. Notwithstanding having won the right to tease him, she had been reluctant to be overly forward in front of the others, but when she'd been close enough to share a quiet word, she had ribbed him about being far less efficient at creating apple tumps than Henry and had insinuated that Weston could out-pick him in a heartbeat. His soft chuckles had made her cheekiness worth the risk. Lord Dunsbourne took teasing well.

Tossing back her covers, she sat up in bed and groaned. It appeared that her arm was not the only casualty of her day of manual labor. She came to her feet and hobbled across the room. Every muscle in her body screamed in protest.

"I fear I will need extra help getting dressed this morning, Lucy."

Her maid offered a sympathetic smile. "Don't you worry none, miss. I'll have you ready in no time."

Phoebe glanced at the clock on the mantel and gasped. "Did I truly sleep that late?"

"I reckon you were fully worn out last night, miss."

There could be no doubt about that. Phoebe had ridden home at the end of a long day in the orchard and had slipped into the house through the servants' entrance. With Lucy's help, she had bathed and changed in time for dinner with her mother. As soon as the meal was over, however, she had excused herself to go to her room—and had promptly gone to bed.

She had planned to be on her way to Dunsbourne Manor by this hour. Lord Dunsbourne was expecting her in the cart shed first thing.

“Hurry, Lucy. Do not worry about my hair. Simply pull it up out of my face.”

Lucy did as she asked, quickly brushing through Phoebe’s long blonde hair and drawing it up with a few well-placed pins. Tightening Phoebe’s stays in record time, she gathered up the gown she’d loaned her and held it out. Phoebe gritted her teeth against the discomfort of moving her limbs and raised her arms. Lucy slid the gown over Phoebe’s head and reached for her shoes.

“The stairs might be difficult at first, miss,” Lucy said. “But it seems like the more you move, the less discomfort you’ll feel.”

“I believe our groom told me something similar when I first learned to ride.” Phoebe grimaced. “I think more muscles may be involved this time.”

“Shall I fetch you some breakfast, miss?”

Phoebe glanced at the clock again. She could not be any later than she already was.

“Thank you, but no. I must be on my way.” She put on her bonnet, tied the ribbons beneath her chin, and then reached for her cloak. Covering Lucy’s gown as best she could, she exited her chambers and started for the stairs. She moved stiffly, bracing herself for the descent. “Phoebe!”

She froze.

“A word, if you please.”

Slowly, Phoebe turned to see her mother approaching down the passageway. Gripping the front of her cloak closed, Phoebe forced a smile. “Good morning, Mother.”

Her mother eyed her suspiciously. “Why are you wearing your cloak and bonnet?”

“I am going to visit Miss Norton.”

“At this hour?” Her mother was aghast. Calling on someone before breakfast was simply not done.

“She is expecting me,” Phoebe said, hoping that would be sufficient. It was not.

“Ridiculous. You were at Dunsbourne Manor all day yesterday. Miss Norton cannot possibly need to see you again so soon.”

“We are working on a rather elaborate project together,” Phoebe said. Her mother frowned. “I did not wish to bring this up—which is why I refrained from mentioning anything at dinner last night—but if you are intending to return to Dunsbourne Manor, I feel that I must.

“Mrs. Webb and Mrs. Gosden came to tea last afternoon, and they had a great deal to say about Lord Dunsbourne. None of it good.” She sniffed. “I chose to ignore Mr. Derrick Webb’s comments before the ball, but I have to say that he did not say anything that was not corroborated by both ladies yesterday.

"I commend you for reaching out to Miss Norton, but it must not come at the expense of your own reputation. Associating with Lord Dunsbourne and his sister is not in your best interest, Phoebe."

Phoebe attempted to breathe calmly. She could not tell when the maligning gossip about the baron had come to feel so personal, but it had. She tightened her grip on her cloak. No good would come from upsetting her mother; she must consider her words carefully.

"I appreciate your concern, Mother, but it is unfounded. Father—whom, I daresay, has spent more time with Lord Dunsbourne in the last few weeks than either Mrs. Webb or Mrs. Gosden—told me that his impression of the gentleman was favorable."

"You know as well as I that first impressions can be misleading. We really should defer to those who have known him longer—who are aware of his past exploits."

Phoebe was quite sure that neither of those ladies knew anything at all about Lord Dunsbourne's personal history, but she refrained from saying so. Instead, she tried a different tack. "Whatever you choose to believe regarding Lord Dunsbourne, it should not prevent me from extending a hand of fellowship to Miss Norton. She has been friendless in this neighborhood for far too long, and I have come to enjoy her company very much."

Her mother pursed her lips. "I agree that she seems a pleasant little thing, but you cannot ignore the other young ladies of your acquaintance because of some mission of mercy you are attempting with Miss Norton."

Phoebe sighed. "I am not ignoring them, Mother. Indeed, I spoke to Miss Webb in the village only a few days ago. I have given Miss Norton my word that I shall help her this week. I do not intend to break it. Afterward, however, I should be happy to socialize with any of the other ladies who wish to do so."

Mrs. Hadford's shoulders sagged. "Far be it for me to have you hurt Miss Norton's feelings, but you must not continue like this past the end of the week. I will not allow your own reputation to be sullied because of time spent at Dunsbourne Manor."

For now, it was the best Phoebe could do. Cognizant that the clock had not stopped for this unexpected encounter, she leaned forward and kissed her mother's cheek. "Thank you, Mother. I shall return this afternoon." She turned, and with her hand on the banister rail, she hurried down the stairs as fast as her screaming muscles would allow. When Aria clattered into the yard outside the Dunsbourne Manor stables a mere twenty minutes later, Oliver appeared to help Phoebe dismount.

"Mornin', Miss Hadford," he said.

"Good morning, Oliver. I am glad to see you. I was afraid that you

would already be in the cart shed by now.”

He shook his head. “Molly’s already there, but the baron has Miss Norton helpin’ with ’er until I’ve finished my mornin’ chores with the other ’orses.” He took Aria’s reins. “It won’t take me long to get this one settled and finish up over ’ere.”

“Are Henry and Weston in the orchard?”

“Yes, miss.”

“I shall head that direction, then. Would you tell Miss Norton that I have arrived when you go to relieve her?”

“Of course, miss.”

Hoping that the discomfort in her muscles would ease somewhat as she walked, Phoebe set off across the yard toward the distant trees. Henry’s tuneful whistle led her to the gardener, who was filling the barrow with apples from Miss Glover’s basket. Phoebe worked to hide her astonishment that the older lady was in the orchard so early.

“Good morning, Miss Glover,” Phoebe said.

“Miss Hadford,” she said, inclining her head without cracking a smile.

“Mornin’, Miss Hadford.” Henry was as cheery as Miss Glover was dour.

“Mornin’, Miss Hadford.” Weston’s echo came from within the branches of the large tree to her right.

Phoebe laughed and picked up a nearby basket. “I am as stiff as a poker today, Weston, so I am doubly glad you are the one up the tree.”

“Keep movin’, miss,” Henry said. “It’ll get easier.”

“So I’ve been told.” Phoebe set her cloak on the ground beneath the nearest tree and pressed her hand to her back. “I pray you are right.”

The work continued much as it had the day before: Weston shook down the apples from the highest branches, Henry reached for the lower ones with a hook attached to a long pole, and Miss Glover and Phoebe gathered them all from the ground, emptying their baskets into the barrow when they were full. Henry and Weston bantered back and forth as they moved around the tree, but Miss Glover said nothing at all.

Phoebe did not mind the older lady’s silence. It was better than harsh or critical conversation. But it caused her to wonder more about Miss Glover. She was a conundrum. On the one hand, she was obviously loyal to Emily and the baron. She had stayed on at Dunsbourne Manor for almost as long as Emily had been alive. And if picking apples at her age without complaint did not prove devotion, Phoebe was not sure what did. On the other hand, the older lady made no effort to hide her dislike and distrust of Phoebe. Although Phoebe had done nothing more than befriend Emily, Miss Glover wished her gone. Why? There had to be a reason.

Phoebe filtered through her memories of their brief and stilted conversations. All she really knew of the woman was that she had grown up in Exeter. Perhaps if she learned more, she could uncover the problem between them.

"Tell me about your family, Miss Glover. Are they living in Exeter?" The lady stilled. Phoebe waited. The rattle of apples falling through the branches sounded to their right. Miss Glover stood and looked over at the carpet of red and green fruit.

"My parents are long gone," she said. "I had one sister who settled within a few miles of the village where we grew up. She died ten years ago of the influenza. I have not heard from her husband or son since then."

What Miss Glover had said—without actually saying it—was that she had no one. They stepped over to the newly fallen apples together.

"When did you come to Dunsbourne Manor?"

"I was working as a governess for two young ladies in Gloucestershire. Their mother died soon after the oldest was married, so I stayed on as a companion to the second. She was betrothed before the end of her first season, so my services were no longer needed." She bent down and started dropping apples into her basket. "I was hired by Lord Dunsbourne's father soon afterward."

Phoebe contemplated this information as she, too, began loading her basket. She could hear the squeak of the barrow's wheels, which meant Henry was returning from the tump. Her chance to talk to Miss Glover alone would soon be gone.

"It is obvious that the current Lord Dunsbourne and Emily appreciate your service very much."

Miss Glover continued to pick up apples, her eyes averted. "I have done my duty. I hope they consider it enough."

Understanding finally came with painful clarity. Dunsbourne Manor was Miss Glover's only home, its occupants her only family. She had been cast off once when the young lady she had companioned had become betrothed. Lord Dunsbourne's new determination to have Emily enter Society was the beginning of the end for Miss Glover. Phoebe's appearance had further exacerbated her fears of becoming expendable.

"Miss Glover," Phoebe said, desperately hoping that somehow the woman could see her as an ally rather than a threat. "You have done considerably more than your duty at Dunsbourne Manor. If that were your only motivation, you would not be in the apple orchard now." She sniffed, but Phoebe guessed that this time the reflex was triggered more by sadness than disparagement. Miss Glover's advancing years made the probability that she would be hired elsewhere slim. Her current, grim disposition was in actuality a reflection of her future

prospects.

Henry arrived back and set the barrow at the base of the next tree.

"Barrow's ready fer another load," he said, reaching for the pole.

Phoebe glanced at Miss Glover. Her head hung low, but she was pushing on, filling her basket one apple at a time.

"Thank you, Henry. We shall not be much longer," Phoebe said.

The sun moved steadily across the sky. Phoebe had discarded her cloak and gloves long before Emily arrived from the shed. Weston's feet barely touched the ground all day. He scampered from one limb to another and one tree to the next. Henry hauled away the barrow full of fruit too many times to count, and yet, the ladies kept picking and gathering and picking some more.

Although her friend's presence lightened Phoebe's mood, it was not enough to prevent her from fretting over Miss Glover's difficult situation. Phoebe had no way of knowing the specifics of Miss Glover's arrangement at Dunsbourne Manor, but she was fully aware of the lack of servants. The baron had let everyone go who was not absolutely vital to the running of the house. That fact alone was something that had surely plagued Miss Glover of late.

Thompson brought them something to eat at midday, and after having missed breakfast, Phoebe was especially grateful. But he was their only visitor. She watched for Lord Dunsbourne to come, hoping he would switch places with Henry as he had the day before, but when the afternoon was wearing on and there was still no sign of him and Phoebe's back felt like it may give out, she emptied her basket into the barrow and set it down.

"I must take a walk, or I may never walk again," she said, pressing her hands against the stays at her back as she stretched.

"That's it, miss. Walkin' will work out the discomfort," Henry said.

Phoebe nodded. "I shall not be gone long."

Chapter 19

ADAM REMOVED THE LATEST BATCH of pulp from the mill trough and set it on the horsehair cloth. As soon as he added this cheese to the press, he could leave the shed to see how things were progressing in the orchard. A vision of Miss Hadford's laughing blue eyes when she dumped the barrow full of apples onto the tump flashed into his mind. He pushed it away.

Fresh air, walking through the trees, and conversing with Henry over the progress he had made today—that was what he was after. Nothing more.

"We have worked Molly hard enough for one day, Oliver. Go ahead and take her back to the stables. She deserves a rest."

"Very good, m' lord."

Oliver set to work releasing the harness from the mill pole. Molly's reaction was a snort that sounded a great deal like a sigh. Adam rolled his shoulders and turned back to his work. He understood her weariness completely.

"Well now, Molly, how have you been managing with this heavy load?"

At the sound of Miss Hadford's voice, Adam swung around to see the lady running her hand down Molly's neck.

"She's done right well, miss," Oliver said. There was a hint of pride in his voice. "No complaints at all."

"Good girl, Molly." Miss Hadford smiled at the horse, and Adam's stomach tightened. Heaven help him. He was truly overtired if he could admit to being jealous of an old plow horse.

He cleared his throat. "Good afternoon, Miss Hadford. Is everything all right in the orchard?"

"Yes, my lord. Everything is fine." Her brow furrowed. "Forgive me. I did not mean to disturb you. I was simply taking a walk. After having been bent over for so long, it is good to be upright for a little while."

It was Adam's turn to frown. He stepped closer. "I would not have you injure yourself with this endeavor, Miss Hadford. Is it your back?"

"A dull ache is all." Her eyes sparkled with the humor he'd seen yesterday. "Unless you are looking for proof that I do not work nearly hard enough under normal circumstances. Then it might be sufficient."

Oliver chuckled softly and led Molly toward the door. "Good day, Miss Hadford."

"Good day, Oliver."

The sound of heavy hooves crossing the yard echoed through the shed.

"You must stay at home tomorrow and rest," Adam said.

“Henry says that if we keep up our current pace, we shall start harvesting the Genet Moyles tomorrow. I will most certainly be here for that.”

“I am grateful for your efforts. Truly, I am. But I must face your father again when he returns from London. You know as well as I that he would not wish his daughter doing the work of a laborer—especially if there is any risk that it would cause her harm.”

She leaned against the now-silent mill, her fingers curling over the rim of the trough as she faced him. “It is not doing me harm. Quite the contrary. It is giving me a great deal of satisfaction and offering me plenty of fresh air.”

His gaze fell upon her hands. Up against the large millstone, they appeared very small—and totally unprotected.

“Where are your gloves?” he asked.

Instantly, she removed her hands from the stone and tucked them behind her back. “I took them off. They were too hot, and the apples kept slipping from my grip.”

Adam extended his own hand. “Let me see.”

“They are fine.”

He released an exasperated breath. “If they are fine, you have nothing to fear from showing them to me.”

Slowly, she drew her arms out from behind her and lifted them toward him. He took her hands and turned them so they were palm up. His pulse quickened at the feel of her fingers against his, but then he saw the long scratch running across the heel of her right thumb, and his eyes snapped to hers.

“How did this happen?” he asked.

“It was a rock. I was reaching for an apple that had rolled farther than I thought and lost my balance. My hand landed on its edge.”

His jaw tightened. It did not look deep enough to cause serious problems, but the risk was always there. “Have you washed it?”

She shook her head. “It happened only a little while ago.”

Without releasing her hand, he led her to a bucket of water in the corner of the shed. A bar of soap and a small rag sat on a nearby barrel.

He picked up the soap in his free hand and met her eyes again. “May I?” he said.

“Yes.” Her voice was barely above a whisper.

He lowered her hand into the bucket. The water was cold, but she did not flinch. He lathered the soap, then ran it gently across the palm of her hand. When he was sure it was clean, he tenderly rotated her hand beneath the water and washed the dirt off her fingers. Neither of them spoke.

Reaching for the rag, he withdrew her hand from the bucket and

wrapped it in the cloth. He felt her gaze and looked up to meet it.

"Thank you," she said.

The intimacy of the moment shook him. He cleared his throat, wishing the action would also clear his head.

"Is there someone at Charwell Park who can make you a salve should you need one?"

"Yes." She hesitated. "I shall wear my gloves tomorrow."

It was not the day of rest he had asked of her, but it was something.

"It may not be the most comfortable, but it would be for the best."

A smile hovered on her lips, and for a fleeting moment, he wondered what it would be like to kiss them. Then the indefensibility of their situation hit him with full force. That he was alone in the shed with Miss Hadford was bad enough; kissing her would be inexcusable.

He released her hand and stepped back a pace. Confusion showed in the furrow of her brow, but she used the rag to pat her hand dry and then set the rag on the barrel beside the soap.

"I should return to the orchard," she said, starting toward the open doors. "I promised Henry that I would not be gone long."

He nodded. "As soon as I have added the last cheese to the press, I shall join you over there."

She stopped, and he half hoped she would offer to wait, so they could walk over together, but then he noticed that the crease had returned to her forehead.

"I realize that it is none of my concern," she began, "but have you given any consideration to what may become of Miss Glover when Emily is married?"

He looked at her blankly. Tackling Emily's first Season was a sufficiently new and terrifying topic; he had no desire to think beyond that.

"I cannot say that I have."

"Might I suggest that you do? And that you talk to Miss Glover about it."

Adam ran his fingers through his hair. His sister and her companion had been far removed from his thoughts during the last few minutes.

"And may I ask what has prompted this suggestion?"

Miss Hadford hesitated, as though choosing her words carefully. "Miss Glover does not like me. At first, I hoped it was simply a wariness of someone new, but her disapproval is no less now that it was before."

Adam went to deny her assertion only to remember Miss Glover's vehement and cautionary words regarding Emily's friendship with Miss Hadford.

"At first, I tried to ignore her attitude toward me," she continued, "but this morning, I decided upon a new approach. I thought that perhaps if I could discover more about her, I might understand what it was

about me that she took exception to.”

She took a small step back toward him. “Did you know that Miss Glover has no real family? None but a brother-in-law and a nephew whom she has not heard from in over a decade. She . . . she has nowhere to go when her usefulness at Dunsbourne Manor is over.” Guilt that he had not taken the time to learn more about the woman who had been in his family’s employ for so many years pricked at him.

“That is regrettable, but I fail to see how that would affect her opinion of you.”

“I am a threat.”

Adam stared at her. He was obviously missing a huge piece of this puzzle.

“A threat?”

“Do you not see? Miss Glover’s position at Dunsbourne Manor is only secure as long as Emily needs her. When you decided that it was time for Emily to experience Society, Miss Glover saw it as the beginning of the end of her usefulness. She knows that gentlemen will notice someone as lovely as Emily—how could they not? They will come courting, and she will marry. For someone in Miss Glover’s position, that scenario would be frightening enough. But then to have Emily invite a friend to the house—someone she has begun looking to for all the things she once relied on her governess for—well, it must be a bitter pill to take.” Miss Hadford lowered her voice. “I do not blame her for hating me.”

Adam took a moment to rein in his reeling thoughts. He had always known that at age twenty-two he had been ill prepared to take over his father’s role, but in the years since then, he had rarely felt it more keenly than he did now. He knew exactly what it was to fear the future—the emotional toll it took on a person. And yet, he had not recognized it in someone else within his own household.

His list of failings was discouragingly long, but this, at least, was something he could put to rights immediately.

“I will speak with Miss Glover,” he said. “I should have done it long ago. I am grateful to you for bringing it to my attention.”

Miss Hadford offered him a tremulous smile. “Thank you, my lord. Very few noblemen would give countenance to a young lady with such negligible understanding of a situation.” She turned to go.

“Miss Hadford.” Her footsteps faltered, and she looked back at him.

“You may be correct with regard to Miss Glover’s state of mind, but I do take exception to one thing you said.”

“What is that, my lord?”

“No one who truly knows you could ever hate you. Miss Glover included.”

Phoebe was struggling to keep her eyes open. She had ridden home from Dunsbourne Manor with just enough time to change her clothing before dinner was served. It had been a race that she would not have won without Lucy's invaluable assistance, but now that she was sitting at the dining table with a full stomach and a warm fire across the room, weariness was hitting with full force.

"Phoebe, have you heard a single thing I have been saying?" Her mother's indignant voice brought her back to the present with a start. "All but the last line or two."

She was fairly sure her mother had been talking about the exorbitant price the local butcher had charged for pork last week. But she could not be certain.

"You have been gone all day. The least you could do is listen to me at dinner. There is no one else at the table, after all."

"Forgive me, Mother." Phoebe blinked a few times, attempting to think through the fog in her head. "I did not mean to be rude. It has been a tiring day."

Her mother frowned. "What on earth are you working on at Dunsbourne Manor that has you leaving so early in the morning and arriving home so exhausted?"

"I cannot tell you the whole of it," Phoebe hedged. "It is rather a grand surprise, you see."

Her mother's eyes narrowed, and Phoebe knew she would have to reveal something more or her chances of returning to Dunsbourne Manor would be slim.

"I have spent most of my time there on the grounds with Miss Norton and her companion, Miss Glover."

At the mention of Miss Norton's elderly companion, her mother visibly relaxed. She obviously assumed nothing too inappropriate could occur if Phoebe were under Miss Glover's watch care.

"I certainly hope you are wearing your bonnet," she said. "The sun will cause freckles to appear in no time at all."

"Yes, Mother." Grateful that she had been asked about her headwear rather than her gloves, Phoebe smiled. "I kept it on the entire time."

"Very well. But I stand by what I told you earlier. Whatever Miss Norton's mysterious project may be, you cannot allow it to monopolize your time much longer." She ran her fingers across the tablecloth, smoothing out the slight bump in the fine linen. "Mr. Derrick Webb called on you today, and I was forced to tell him that you were unavailable."

Phoebe's head shot up, her sleepiness forgotten. "Did he give a reason for coming?"

"He did not." Her mother smiled knowingly. "I very much doubt that he thought it necessary to offer an explanation."

A ball of lead formed in Phoebe's stomach. "Did you tell him where I was?"

"I am not quite so naive as all that, my dear. It is far better to keep a gentleman guessing. It is quite the best way to maintain their interest."

"But I have no desire whatsoever to capture Mr. Webb's interest."

"Whyever not?" Her mother looked at her as though she were mad.

"He is everything a young lady would wish for—wealthy, well connected, and quite handsome."

"He is arrogant and deceitful."

Her mother gasped. "Phoebe Hadford, what has come over you?"

"An increased appreciation of truth and honor," she said, rising to her feet. "I am sorry if this comes as a disappointment to you, Mother, but the more I learn about Mr. Webb, the less I admire him. Indeed, in the future, I would prefer to have nothing whatsoever to do with the gentleman."

Phoebe did not think it had ever happened before, but it appeared that she had shocked her mother into silence. Perhaps if she had not so recently been witness to Lord Dunsbourne's decency or learned of Mr. Webb's hypocrisy, she would have couched her words more carefully. As it was, she was too tired to do anything more than regret causing her mother distress.

She walked around the table and leaned down to kiss her mother's cheek. "Forgive me for speaking my mind so forcefully, Mother. I daresay I should have been more considerate in the way in which I expressed my feelings, but at least you now know where I stand on the matter of Mr. Webb." She took a step back. "If you will excuse me, I should like to retire to my rooms for the night."

Her mother nodded mutely.

"Good night, Mother." Phoebe walked out of the dining room. She crossed the main hall and started up the stairs. She hated leaving her mother in such a way, but it was preferable to staying and allowing the conversation to degenerate further. It was best that her mother be given some time to consider Phoebe's estimation of Mr. Webb—to view him in a new light—before they spoke of him again.

Forcing all thoughts of the man from her mind, Phoebe entered her bedchamber. Lucy was there. She had the bed covers turned down, the fire banked, and the curtains drawn. It was the most wonderful sight in the world.

"Oh, Lucy, what would I do without you?" Phoebe asked.

Lucy smiled. "After all that time in the orchard, I guessed you'd be ready for bed right away."

Phoebe did not need to tell her maid how right she was. She simply allowed Lucy to help her undress and brush out her hair before she

crawled into bed.

“Will you be needing anything else, miss?” Lucy asked.

“No, thank you. You have done more than enough already.” Moving stiffly, Phoebe leaned over and blew out the candle on her bedside table.

“Good night, miss.”

“Good night, Lucy.”

By the light of the glowing embers of the fire, Lucy let herself out of the room and closed the door behind her. Phoebe lay back against her pillow and closed her eyes. Slowly, her fingers traced the scratch that ran across her palm, and a vision of Lord Dunsbourne filled her mind. He was in the cart shed, holding her hand, looking at her with such tenderness it made her throat ache.

She still did not know what had happened years before to cause the haunted look she sometimes saw in his eyes. She did not understand why he had removed himself from Society for so long. But of one thing she was convinced: he was an honorable man. And during that intimate moment they had shared in the cart shed, no matter his shadowy past, she had wanted Lord Dunsbourne to kiss her.

Chapter 20

AT LAST. AFTER TEN DAYS of stopping by White's every afternoon and feigning interest in Bertrand's boring monologues, Freddie's persistence had finally paid off. Hadford was in the salon, and better yet, he was sitting with the viscount.

Tamping down his eagerness, Freddie crossed the room slowly. He greeted a few of the regulars with a nod or a brief word, but he did not stop until he reached his quarry.

"Good afternoon, my lord." He inclined his head. "Mr. Hadford. Delighted to see you again."

"There you are at last, Wilmott," Bertrand said. "It's about time. Take a seat. Take a seat." He waved Freddie in the direction of his usual chair. "I have just been telling Hadford here that you were hoping to catch him before he returns to Berkshire."

"Indeed," Freddie said. "When do you return, sir?"

"The day after tomorrow." Hadford crossed one leg over the other. "It has been a fortnight since I was home—although, in many respects, it feels longer."

"Oh?" Freddie left the vague word hanging, wondering what else he could learn. To have Hadford's business dealings go awry at this juncture would be the worst possible timing. As it was, he was going to have to speed up his timetable if he wished to ensnare the gentleman before he left town.

Hadford grunted. "Far too many hours spent down at the docks for my liking. But the goods I ordered are all accounted for and are exactly what I was hoping, so I have no real cause for complaint."

Freddie relaxed. If all was well with Hadford's business dealings, all was well with his bank account. It was time to make his move.

"You are most fortunate, then." He slipped his hand into his jacket pocket and withdrew his forged letter. "I remember the last time we spoke, you mentioned your association with den Haan. Have you heard from him recently?"

"Can't say that I have."

Freddie frowned. "He has been put in a tight spot. And by an Englishman, no less." He waved the letter. "I received this a week ago, and since he mentioned you by name, I thought you should read it."

Hadford sat forward on his chair. "Has something gone amiss with his factory expansion?"

"With his funding, more's the pity." Freddie handed Hadford the letter. "See what you can make of it."

Hadford opened the letter and began to read. Freddie watched his eyes flit back and forth across the page. He knew exactly what each line said. He had crafted the correspondence himself.

Voorburgwal 95, Amsterdam

23 September 1788

Dear Mr. Wilmott,

Upon learning that you recently relocated from Amsterdam to London, I determined to write to ask for your assistance with a most delicate matter.

An Englishman by the name of Mr. Edward Trevors recently opened a correspondence with me, purportedly with the intent of investing in my textile company. Only this week, I discovered that rather than advancing me one thousand English pounds, he has, in fact, defrauded me of the same sum.

I have reason to believe that Mr. Trevors is now in London, and I ask that you do everything in your power to locate the gentleman. Once he is found, I believe that my associate Mr. Reginald Hadford would be willing to assist in recovering my money. I have written to Mr. Hadford regarding the financial details, but it is probable that my letter will take a few weeks to reach him in Berkshire. Please respond with your findings as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

Willem den Haan

“Good heavens. This is terrible.” Hadford lowered the letter, his expression shocked. “Have you managed to locate the fiend?”

“I have.”

“What is this all about, Hadford?” Bertrand wished for his part in the conversation, but Hadford was more anxious to hear what Freddie had to say.

“Here, my lord. You may read it yourself.” He passed the missive to the viscount and turned his attention back to Freddie. “You have found Trevors, you say?”

“Yes. Although it took some doing. I searched all the gentlemen’s clubs in town to no avail. Only when I went back and questioned the bookies did I learn that Mr. Trevors places regular bets on the races, and he is not known for gambling paltry amounts.”

Hadford raised his eyebrows. “Do you believe that is where den Haan’s money has gone?”

“Perhaps. But if that is the case, Trevors has given us something to work with. He has made a name for himself in the gambling community—and he will not wish to damage it. We simply need to persuade him that returning the money to den Haan will be far less painful in the long run than having it become known in the betting circles that he has defrauded someone of one thousand pounds.”

“Now, just one minute.” Bertrand pointed at the letter. “This is all

very irregular. Whyever would the Dutchman write to you and Hadford over such a hefty grievance? Something like this should be handled by one of those Bow Street fellows, surely.”

“I imagine he was hoping to take care of it without it becoming public knowledge.”

“Wilmott is right,” Hadford said. “If news of a loss like this were known abroad, it could be very damaging to den Haan’s business.”

Freddie eyed the viscount. “I assume we can count upon your full discretion, my lord.”

“Well, of course.” Bertrand squared his shoulders as though preparing for battle. “That goes without saying.”

“Just as I thought,” Freddie said with a placating smile.

Hadford took the letter back and glanced at it once more. “I have corresponded with den Haan enough to know his script and his seal. This would seem to be a genuine plea for help.” He looked over at Freddie. “You have obviously had longer to consider the issue. Have you come upon a viable solution?”

“I believe I have.” Freddie masked his glee with a thoughtful pose. This could not be going any better. Hadford was putty in his hands.

“I have learned a few things about Mr. Trevors that we can use to our advantage. First, he is a man of habit. He takes a walk through Old Ryland’s Green at noon every day. He wears the same red coat, white wig, and eye patch, no matter the weather. Second, as a gentleman who may wish to place a bet at any time, he carries an indecently large amount of cash on his person.”

“Forgive me,” Hadford said. “But I fail to see how these points can directly aid us in our goal.”

Freddie pressed his elbows to his knees and leaned forward. “I propose that you meet Mr. Trevors on his walk tomorrow. You now know how to recognize him. Once you have made your introductions, draw him into a conversation about mercantile affairs in Amsterdam, and by pretending that he can be of service to you, invite him to your home to dine with you. Once you have him at Charwell Park, you can explain the whole of it, show him the letter from den Haan, and inform him that unless he refunds the money immediately, you will expose the affair to the bookkeepers. As he always travels with significant funds, I daresay he will hand over the money before he leaves your table.”

“By Jove. That is most ingenious.” Bertrand appeared suitably impressed.

“You think he would be willing to travel all the way to Charwell Park?” Hadford asked.

Freddie shrugged. “If the gentleman frequents Ascot as often as I have been led to believe, he is very used to traveling into Berkshire.”

“Fair enough,” Hadford said. “I shall attempt a meeting with Mr. Trevors tomorrow. If all goes well, I shall send word ahead of me to Charwell Park to have my wife expect a guest at dinner the next day.” “Marvelous.” Freddie signaled a passing footman. Moments later, three glasses of brandy appeared. He took one and raised it. “To the success of this endeavor and the removal of all felons in our midst.” “Hear, hear,” Bertrand said as he and Hadford raised their glasses to Freddie’s.

Freddie smiled and set down his drink. His work here was complete. It was time for this felon to make his exit.

The gray light outside the cart shed was turning a warm gold. Adam rinsed his hands and exited the building, walking briskly back toward the house. He had been up since dawn, emptying the apple press of yesterday's crushed fruit before the milling began today. No one but Cook had been about at that early hour, and he would not normally have returned to the house before evening, but he was determined to speak with Miss Glover before she and Emily set off for the orchard. He glanced at the sky. No clouds marred the deepening cerulean color. The unseasonably warm and sunny weather had been a godsend. Regardless of their lack of extra help, they were harvesting apples at record speed. There had been no delays for storms, and the apples were sweetening in the sun-drenched tumps faster than usual. The lawn was starting to show the strain associated with lack of moisture, and the leaves on the trees were crisping earlier than he remembered them doing in the past, but he would not complain. He could not have asked for better harvesting conditions.

Much as they had all night, his thoughts drifted back to Miss Hadford. She, too, had been a godsend. He still marveled that she was willing to work in the orchard all day long—and in her maid's clothing. A smile played across his lips. She could have no idea how attractive she looked in such simple attire. He did not fully understand the connection he felt to her, but he was willing to admit that it was becoming harder to ignore. Even now, contemplating the moment he had looked into her eyes after washing her hand caused his heart to pound. It was far safer to focus on what she had revealed about Miss Glover.

He had hoped to speak with his sister's companion last evening, but by the time he had finished his work in the cart shed, the older lady had already retired for the night. There could be no doubt that the long days in the orchard had been excessively wearying for her, but that she was willing to participate was further reason why he could not put off speaking with her any longer. Her loyalty deserved more than he had previously offered.

Thompson greeted him as he entered the house. "Good morning, my lord."

"Good morning, Thompson. I am looking for Miss Glover."

"I believe she is in the dining room, my lord."

Adam started in that direction only to see Emily hurry out of the room.

"Oh, Adam." She staggered to a stop. "Did you wonder what had become of us? I have only to gather my bonnet and gloves and I shall be ready to join Henry in the orchard."

"There is no rush. I was hoping to catch Miss Glover before she went out. Is she in the dining room still?"

"She is."

Curiosity shone in his sister's eyes, but Adam offered no further explanation.

"Good. I shall speak with her whilst you fetch your things."

Recognizing the informal dismissal, Emily continued down the passageway toward the stairs.

Adam entered the dining room. Miss Glover was sitting at the table, a half-eaten roll on her plate and a cup of drinking chocolate in her hand.

At his appearance in the doorway, she set her cup down and rose to her feet. "Lord Dunsbourne."

"Good morning, Miss Glover," Adam said. "Please, sit down and finish your meal."

She resumed her seat and looked at him uncertainly. "May I help you, my lord?"

Adam determined to come right to the point. "I wondered if you would be so good as to share your plans for the future with me."

Miss Glover blanched. "My . . . my plans for the future, my lord?"

"Yes." He waited, not wishing to give her the opportunity to simply agree with any vague suggestion he might offer.

"I . . ." Her coloring turned from white to pink, and she fiddled with the edge of the tablecloth. "As of yet, I do not have any fixed plans for when Miss Norton is no longer in need of my services."

"I see." He dropped into a chair on the opposite side of the table from Miss Glover and fixed her with a serious look. "Over the many years that you have been at Dunsbourne Manor, I blindly assumed that you were aware of my appreciation of your service and of my determination that your devotion to my sister should not go unrewarded."

He paused, choosing his words carefully. "Like you, I do not know exactly what the future holds, but this much I will tell you, Miss Glover: I should very much like to have you stay on as Emily's companion until the day that she marries. If, at that point, she wishes you to go with her to her new home, I hope you will consider it. If she chooses to enter the next phase of life alone and you determine that you would rather not seek employment with another family, I will ensure that you receive a monthly stipend sufficient to keep you in a modest home at the location of your choice."

If the cider production were as successful as he hoped, he would be able to cover a financial outlay such as this without much difficulty. If not, he would find another way. He had to. For Miss Glover to leave Dunsbourne Manor destitute after all she had done for his family was unthinkable.

To his immense discomfort, tears filled Miss Glover's eyes. "Thank

you, my lord.”

“No. Thank you, Miss Glover. It was remiss of me to not discuss this matter with you sooner.”

She sniffed. “I am most grateful and look forward to being of service as long as I am needed.”

With a chagrined smile, Adam rose to his feet. “I daresay you never imagined apple picking would be added to your list of duties, but you have been magnificent in your efforts in that regard also.”

Miss Glover’s chin wobbled, and Adam decided it was past time that he returned to the cart shed.

“Good day, Miss Glover.”

“Good day, my lord,” she replied.

Adam made it as far as the door and then turned back to face her. “I wish I could claim credit for any thoughtfulness on my part—overdue though it is—but you should know that it is Miss Hadford who brought this matter to my attention. No matter your earlier reservations about the lady, we are both the beneficiaries of her sensitivity.”

Miss Glover’s red-rimmed eyes widened. She nodded mutely, and Adam walked out of the room.

Chapter 21

BY NOON, NICHOLAS WILMOTT NO longer existed. Freddie Payne was at Old Ryland's Green, but he was fully unrecognizable. The trickster had aged over twenty years in the last hour. A thick application of white lead powder to his face and vermilion rouge to his cheeks had created a pasty complexion that caked in the small lines around his eyes and mouth. A little extra white powder on his eyebrows had them matching the white wig he now wore, and a beauty patch conveniently hid his rather distinctive smallpox scar on his right cheek.

He wore an eye patch over his left eye. It was the best he could do to conceal his distinctive gray eyes, and it had the benefit of engendering sympathy among those who assumed he had lost an eye fighting for England. His red coat was a size too large, which gave him the appearance of being rather more portly than he really was. This illusion was underscored by the cumbersome gait he affected and the smart walking stick he carried with him. Indeed, his transformation from Freddie Payne to Edward Trevors was as remarkable as it was complete.

He paused at the corner of the park to consult his pocket watch. Two minutes before noon. He could not have timed his arrival more perfectly. Now he had only to hope that Hadford would be equally prompt.

Freddie began his walk, following the path that cut across the grass toward the far side of the green. Mature trees dotted the area, their leaves starting to brown and fall. Several yards away, two gentlemen rode their horses across the leaf-strewn grass, the dried foliage crunching slightly beneath the horses' hooves. A lady and gentleman walked by, her hand on his arm. Neither of them paid any attention to Freddie. So much the better.

Pausing to supposedly admire the view, Freddie glanced over his shoulder. Other than the couple who had just passed by, the path was empty. Frowning, he looked the other way. A carriage had just pulled up to the opposite corner of the green. He watched as a footman jumped down to open the door, his pulse quickening the moment he recognized the gentleman alighting from within. Hadford put on his hat and turned to say something to the footman before starting down the path toward Freddie.

Gripping the handle of his walking stick, Freddie ambled forward. His red coat stood out amongst the greenery, and he knew Hadford had likely spotted him the moment he'd set foot on the path. It would not be long before he reached him. Hoping the gentleman would take the lead if Freddie offered him a conversation starter, he stopped to

admire the sculpture of King George standing on a tall pedestal. He sensed Hadford step up beside him but did not look his way.

"A decent likeness, would you not say?" Hadford said.

The gentleman had taken the bait. A little small talk about the statue and then they could move on to other more important things.

"I would, indeed." Freddie pitched his voice a little lower than normal. "Although, I do not suppose the king imagined so many pigeons standing on his head when he commissioned the work."

Hadford chuckled, and Freddie smothered a gloating smile. The gentleman had already lowered his guard. It was time for an introduction.

"Edward Trevors," he said.

Hadford inclined his head. "Reginald Hadford. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

Freddie furrowed his brow. He could feel the caking powder on his forehead crack. "I say, I don't suppose you're the Hadford who owns all the cargo being unloaded off the ship that came in from the West Indies this week, are you?"

Hadford lifted his eyebrows. "Indeed, I am."

"Well now, that is a coincidence. I was just talking to a fellow about you." Freddie scratched his wig. "The name escapes me at present, but he offered a very positive impression of your business acumen."

"Nice of you to say so." Hadford paused. "Are you a businessman yourself?"

"I am. Although I favor working with our European neighbors rather than the West Indies. Bruges and Paris most recently; Amsterdam for many years."

"Fascinating. I have a few connections in Amsterdam myself." He shifted his feet uneasily. "I do not suppose you would care to discuss your experience with Dutch exports over the years, would you? It might be helpful to have another Englishman's perspective on some of the new tariffs being introduced."

"Capital idea. There's no point in all of us fighting the same battles, is there?"

"Not at all." Hadford's shoulders relaxed slightly. "I return to Charwell Park in Berkshire tomorrow. It's rather a distance, I realize, but would you consider joining me there? For dinner, perhaps?"

A nursemaid walked by pushing a perambulator. The baby cried, and the pigeons sitting on the former monarch's shoulder took off in a flurry of feathers. Freddie watched them go, enjoying the increasing tension clearly visible on Hadford's face.

"I travel to Berkshire quite often, as it happens," he said. "I should be happy to come."

Hadford's relief was palpable. "Well then, I suggest we do not delay

our meeting. What do you say to coming to dine on Thursday?" "The day after tomorrow?" Freddie made a show of considering the matter. "It is rather short notice, but I believe it is feasible." "Marvelous."

Freddie took out his pocket watch and glanced at it. "Forgive me, but I must be on my way." He snapped the gold lid closed and slid the timepiece back into his vest pocket with a smile. "Until Thursday, then, Hadford."

"Yes." Hadford appeared dazed. "Thursday at Charwell Park."

Freddie nodded, and then maintaining his slow and laborious gait, he started back the way he had come. He heard Hadford's brisk footsteps going the opposite direction, and only when he could hear them no more did he chance a glance over his shoulder. The gentleman had already reached his waiting carriage and was climbing inside. At last, Freddie allowed himself to grin. Today's meeting could not have been scripted more perfectly.

Henry tipped the barrow over the tump, and Phoebe guided the rolling apples to the outer edges of the large pile.

"We won't be needin' many more," Henry said, shifting his hat a fraction and running his sleeve across his glistening brow. "Then this tump'll be ready for straw."

Phoebe nodded. Now that they were out from under the protection of the apple trees, they were feeling the full effects of the afternoon sun. The unseasonably warm temperature was marvelous for the apples but not quite so pleasant for those working to harvest them.

Henry turned the barrow and started back toward the trees. Phoebe went to follow him and then hesitated. She glanced over her shoulder. A few yards away, the grass ended at the banks of the river, and the soothing gurgle of cool, running water was hard to ignore.

"I think I shall walk to the river, Henry," she said.

"Right you are, miss." The old gardener gave her a craggy smile. "It will take a bit fer us to 'ave another batch ready fer transport, so you take yer time."

He continued forward, and as the sound of squeaking wheels disappeared into the trees, Phoebe crossed the short strip of grass and dropped to her knees at the riverbank. Peeling off her gloves, she set them on the ground beside her and reached forward until her hands entered the water.

It was beautifully cool. She moved her fingers against the current, loving the feel of the water slipping through them. A bee buzzed past. Phoebe raised her head and sat back on her heels. Shaking off the water from her hands, she tugged at the ribbons beneath her chin and took off her bonnet. She placed it on top of her gloves, dipped her hands into the river again, and scooped up some water.

A trail of drips discolored Lucy's dress as Phoebe applied the water to her cheeks and neck. She closed her eyes, reveling in the simple joy of the moment.

"Are you quite well, Miss Hadford?"

At the sound of Lord Dunsbourne's voice, Phoebe's eyes flew open and she swung around, her arm brushing her bonnet and sending it rolling over the riverbank.

"Oh no!" She lunged for the errant headwear, but it was already in the water.

The ribbons sank below the surface, but the bonnet bobbed up and down a couple times before the current caught it and it sailed out of reach.

"Stay there," the baron called.

A splash followed, and Phoebe turned from watching her bonnet swirl into the center of the river to see Lord Dunsbourne wading out to capture it. She rose to her feet in dismay. Although the river was

relatively shallow and the water clear, the tops of his boots were completely submerged. He teetered once before steadying himself long enough to reach out and catch the bonnet by its brim. With her bonnet in hand, he turned and sloshed his way back to the bank. Phoebe watched him approach, struggling to know which should come first, an expression of gratitude or an apology.

Still standing in the water, he extended the wet bonnet to her. "Your bonnet, Miss Hadford."

"Thank you, my lord." Phoebe bit her lip and took it from him. "I am so terribly sorry."

"Nonsense." He climbed out of the river, water streaming down his legs. "You have nothing to apologize for."

"You are soaking wet, and your boots are likely ruined."

He looked at his feet. Puddles were forming around them. "These are my oldest working boots. They have survived far worse than a brief immersion in river water." He paused. "Although, it might be best to ensure that no minnows entered them."

Phoebe gasped. The horrifying possibility that tiny fish might be swimming in his boots had not even occurred to her.

"Take them off at once!" she said.

Lord Dunsbourne chuckled, and her gaze flew from his dripping footwear to his laughter-filled eyes.

"You are teasing me again," she accused.

"I confess, as a boy, I waded into this river more times than I can count, but never once has a minnow entered my boots."

"This might be the first time," Phoebe warned.

"It may, indeed." He gestured to the grass. "Are you willing to stay while I take off my boots and check for any unwelcome creatures?"

Phoebe had no desire whatsoever to witness anything other than water coming from Lord Dunsbourne's boots. But he had rescued her bonnet. She could not very well refuse. Realizing that he would only sit after she was seated, she lowered herself to the ground and covered her ankles as best she could.

He dropped down beside her, yanked off a boot, and held it upside down. A small stream of water trickled out, but thankfully, there were no minnows to be seen.

"Why did you regularly wade into the river as a child?" she asked.

"To fish," he said. "To my childish way of thinking, if I was unable to catch anything from the riverbank, all the trout must be congregated in the middle of the river. And if they refused to come to me, I went to them."

Phoebe could easily picture the scene: a small, dark-haired boy with a net in hand, up to his waist in water. The baron's resolve to see a plan through had obviously manifested itself at an early age.

"And were your efforts successful? Did one determined young fisherman outwit a river full of wily trout?"

"Ah," he said. "I see you have ascertained one of my strengths and weaknesses already."

"You consider your determination to be a weakness as well as a strength?"

"I believe that how one labels the trait depends upon which side of it one falls. Cook was the person who suffered the most because of my youthful persistence at the river. One summer, she became so tired of preparing trout for dinner, she begged my governess to hide my fishing pole and net until at least five days had passed without fish on the menu."

Phoebe laughed, and with a grin, he replaced his first boot and tugged off the second. He emptied the second boot of water and glanced inside.

"No minnows," he said. "They must have ascertained that my sole reason for entering the river is to capture trout and bonnets."

"How remarkable. I would not have thought that so tiny a fish would exhibit such intelligence."

"Well, I am rather glad they opted to stay away." The twitch of his lips belied his serious tone. "Wet feet without the addition of minnows are definitely my preference."

Lord Dunsbourne was accepting his unpleasant state of dress very well, but it was hard to ignore her feeling of culpability. "Would it not be better to go back to the house to change?"

"I came this way to check on the new tumps," he said. "But truth be told, I was more than ready to escape the blistering heat of the cart shed. My boots and clothing will dry quickly enough." He put his second boot back on. "Indeed, if the temperature in the cart shed does not drop in the next hour or so, I may suggest that Oliver come douse his feet."

"And will you require my bonnet for a second rescue?"

He chuckled. "I daresay Oliver can manage without it." The humor in his expression disappeared. "But you have not told me why you were at the river without your gloves and hat."

"I, too, was feeling the heat," she admitted. "I was simply enjoying the water for a moment."

He reached for her hat. Puzzled, she relinquished it only to have him set it gently on her head. His fingers brushed her neck as he drew the wet ribbons down below her chin. Something in his eyes changed, and the distance between them seemed to shrink.

"It would not do for you to be without your bonnet for long," he said.

"The sun can cause havoc on skin as fair as yours."

Phoebe held completely still. No matter what exposure to the sun

might do to her, Lord Dunsbourne's touch was causing untold mayhem.

"I . . . I will keep it on for the rest of the day."

"That would be best." His eyes did not leave hers, but his fingers moved across her cheek, his touch so light it was barely more than a whisper. "As tiresome as they may be, your hat and gloves are intended to safeguard you." His voice quieted. "And your protection is of the utmost importance."

Phoebe's lips parted and she took an unsteady breath. When had the simple act of breathing become so difficult?

In the river, a loud plop interrupted the smooth flow of water. She flinched, and Lord Dunsbourne instantly pulled back.

"What was that?" Phoebe placed one hand to her chest, attempting to calm the maelstrom of emotions swirling within.

"A fish," he said. He rose to his feet, a hint of regret behind the smile he offered her. "There were none in my boots, but it seems that they wish to make their presence felt after all."

A fish. Phoebe had never liked the things very much—in the water or on a plate—but after what the unseen minnows and dratted trout had put her emotions through today, she would forever consign them to the same unfavorable position as mushrooms.

Lord Dunsbourne bent over to retrieve her gloves and handed them to her.

"I fear I have been gone from the cart shed too long," he said. "Do you intend to stay here a little while, or may I assist you to your feet?"

"I should return to the orchard," she said, fumbling to tie the ribbons beneath her chin before putting on her gloves. "Emily will be wondering what has become of me."

He extended his arm, and she placed her hand in his. His strong fingers—that had been so gentle moments ago—curved around hers. Keeping her gaze on their clasped hands, she rose to stand beside him. "I wish you well with the milling," she said.

He released her hand and stepped away. "Good day, Miss Hadford." She attempted a genuine smile. It was for the best that they had been interrupted. It was even better that her gloves had almost masked the tenderness of this last touch. Perhaps if she repeated those words enough, she might actually believe them.

Chapter 22

IT WAS PHOEBE'S FINAL DAY in the Dunsbourne orchard. Weston had dropped the last apple from the tree, and everyone standing below had cheered. The picking was over, and it was cause for celebration. Phoebe watched Henry wheel the barrow toward the tump for the final time, and she swallowed the lump in her throat.

"Thank you, Phoebe." Emily wrapped her arms around her.

"It was my pleasure. I will miss being here with all of you."

"I will miss it too," Emily said. "Although, I may stay in bed until noon tomorrow."

Phoebe laughed. "I shall think of you from beneath my own covers."

"Do you wish to come back to the house before you return home?"

There were still a couple of hours left to the afternoon, but Phoebe knew her mother would be watching for her appearance. She had said nothing about Phoebe's outburst regarding Mr. Derrick Webb's character since the evening it had happened, but Phoebe felt her mother observing her all the more closely now. As much as she hated to see her regular visits to Dunsbourne orchards end, having her days free would give her the opportunity to smooth things over with her mother.

"Thank you, but no. I shall walk over to the cart shed to tell Oliver I will be taking Aria earlier than usual."

"Very well." Emily squeezed her once more before releasing her. "But promise that you will come and visit again very soon."

Phoebe smiled. "I will."

"I shall also look forward to seeing you, Miss Hadford." Miss Glover's voice was calm and measured, but her positive comment nearly shook the ground beneath Phoebe's feet.

"Thank you, Miss Glover," Phoebe managed.

The older lady smiled. The expression had become more and more common over the last few days, and Phoebe's heart warmed. Miss Glover would likely never see her as a close friend, but she was no longer an enemy—and that was sufficient for now.

"I'll watch for you in the village, Miss Hadford," Weston called. He hung from the lowest branch of the apple tree, then dropped to the ground.

"If I see the limbs of the horse chestnut on the green shaking the next time I am there, I shall know who is gathering conkers up in the tree," she said.

Weston chuckled. "The best ones are always at the top."

"You watch yerself boy." Henry arrived back from the tump in time to hear Weston's last comment. "Them horse chestnuts are a fair bit taller than these apple trees."

"It's all right, Uncle Henry. I'll be careful."

"You'd better be. I need yer help for a while yet. We need to load the apples from the first tumps into the barrow."

"Now?"

"Well, Lord Dunsbourne ain't payin' you to stand around and gab."

Weston reached for the barrow's handles. "All right, then, which way?"

Henry chuckled. Likely, he knew he would be the one who would push when the barrow was full of apples. For now, however, he appeared happy to give the boy his chance as he took the lead through the trees. Emily and Miss Glover gathered the baskets, and with a friendly wave, they set off for the house, leaving Phoebe to walk to the cart shed alone.

It was a familiar walk. Somehow, she had fallen into the habit of taking a break each afternoon to stretch her legs and her back. And without fail, her feet had taken her to the cart shed. If she'd arrived early enough, she'd showered Molly with attention, but most often, by the time she arrived, Oliver was preparing to take the horse to the stables to rest and Phoebe spent a few minutes talking to Lord Dunsbourne. Neither of them had spoken of their time together at the river, and not since he'd noticed the cut on her hand had he stopped what he was doing to talk to her. But every once in a while, Phoebe would catch a look in his eyes that made her heart beat a little faster and cause her to wonder if he thought on those incidents as often as she did.

Phoebe had enjoyed learning the various phases of the cider-making process as she watched him work. While he'd loaded apples into the mill, tested the pulp, and filled the press, they'd shared stories from their youth, including some of the baron's exploits at school and Phoebe's games of make-believe in the nursery. They had confessed to their favorite foods—pasties for Lord Dunsbourne and gingerbread for Phoebe—and their least favorite foods—gooseberry fool for Lord Dunsbourne and mushrooms for Phoebe. The baron had chuckled over her account of the string of toe injuries she had endured beneath the feet of her partners at her first ball and had made Phoebe laugh when he'd told of his debut attempt at rowing beneath a low-arched bridge on the river in Cambridge. In short, a friendship had grown between them, and Phoebe knew quite well that this part of her apple picking adventure would be what she would miss the most in the days to come.

"Afternoon, Miss Hadford." Oliver spotted her as she entered the shed. He was already untying Molly's harness.

"Good afternoon, Oliver." She moved closer and rubbed her gloved hand over the horse's nose. "Good afternoon, Molly. Are you ready for

a rest?"

"She is that, miss."

"When you have finished with Molly, will you make Aria ready for me?"

"Yes, miss."

Lord Dunsbourne paused in his cranking on the wheel of the press.

"You are leaving early today."

Phoebe smiled. "We have picked our last apple."

The baron walked away from the press, rubbing his hands down the side of his breeches. "Truly. They are all down?"

"Every last one."

He smiled, and Phoebe's breath caught. He was truly the most handsome man she had ever encountered. "I defy anyone to find a better orchard crew."

She laughed. "We would have been lost without Weston's acrobatics in the trees. The boy cannot be stopped."

"Where is he now?"

"Loading up the next tump of apples. He and Henry will be here before you know it."

"I'll take Molly to the stables and be back with Aria right away,"

Oliver said. "I can take care of the barrow when it comes, m' lord."

Lord Dunsbourne nodded his approval, and Oliver led Molly out of the shed. The clip-clop of her hooves followed them across the yard.

"You will not be back, then," Lord Dunsbourne said.

Phoebe shook her head. "We heard word from my father yesterday. He will return home tomorrow and is bringing a guest. My mother will wish me to be there for that." She offered him a glimpse of her regret. "I will miss it here."

"And we shall miss you." He cleared his throat. "I shall miss you."

Phoebe took a step toward him. There was something she had to ask. She was taking a huge risk—she knew that—but she did not know when she would have an opportunity to be alone with him again. She could only pray that one pointed question would not unravel the friendship they had developed.

"Lord Dunsbourne, you are not the scoundrel people believe you to be. Why do you not refute it? Why do you not allow others to see you the way I have come to see you?"

If possible, his brown eyes darkened. "How do you see me?"

"As an honorable gentleman who works hard and who genuinely cares about others."

His eyes held hers a moment longer, and then he released a long breath and turned away, gazing off through the open doors to the orchard beyond.

A blackbird flew across the yard toward the nearby apple trees, the flutter of its wings seeming particularly loud when compared to the complete silence within the cart shed.

“Lord Dunsbourne?” Miss Hadford’s voice was low, hesitant.

Adam took another deep breath—one that he hoped would fortify him for what lay ahead. The time had come to trust again.

“I was in London, enjoying a life typical of most noblemen before they take upon themselves the responsibilities of their inheritances,” he began. “It was the night of the Wightmans’ ball, I remember. A courier arrived, bringing with him a message from my father. He offered no details in the missive. It simply stated that I was needed at Dunsbourne Manor immediately. I made my apologies to my host and hostess and left right away.

“When I arrived, I found my father in his study and received my first shock of many that night. He had aged twenty years since I had last seen him—and that had been less than a month before. His face was drawn, and his hands shook. He bade me sit, and then he proceeded to tell me of an investment he had made that had gone terribly wrong.

“A man by the name of Nicholas Wilmott had approached him about investing in a bakery that was to open not far from Whitehall in London. He showed my father documents that supposedly proved that several other prominent noblemen had already committed to the venture, along with a letter from a renowned French baker who was supposed to have been the mastermind behind the culinary creations at the bakery.”

“Supposed?” Miss Hadford asked.

Adam set his jaw. “Mr. Wilmott hoodwinked my father into investing the entire Dunsbourne fortune into a fictitious bakery with fictitious investors and a fictitious staff.”

He heard her gasp but did not look at her.

“Everything?” she whispered.

“Everything but our London townhouse, this house, and the land it stands on,” he said. “With the stroke of my father’s quill, we became essentially penniless overnight.”

“Was there no recourse you could take?”

“Oh, I tried. Believe me, I tried every means possible. But by the time my father realized what had happened, the money was gone from the bank, and there was no way to get it back.” He fisted his hands as the memories became even more painful. “Over the next few weeks, I watched my father slowly waste away. He stopped eating and did not leave his bedchamber. No matter that he had been swindled by the most notorious thief in England, he felt completely culpable. Nothing I could say would dissuade him. His last words to me were an apology for leaving my inheritance in ruins.” Adam swallowed against the

ache in his throat.

At some point during his narrative, Miss Hadford had moved to stand beside him. He felt her fingers touch his. Without exchanging a word, he opened his fist and took her hand, threading his fingers between hers.

She squeezed his hand gently, and he continued. "After my father's funeral, I spent days going through the financial ledgers. Even after selling the townhouse, it quickly became apparent that the only possible way to survive was by making drastic economies to the household staff. Every dismissal was painful. We ate more simply, we bought no new clothing—other than what Emily needed because she was still growing—and we did not socialize. At first, we were in mourning and I was completely focused on pulling Dunsbourne Manor out of bankruptcy. Later, my obsession with finding the man who had done this to us consumed my every waking hour."

"You know who it was, then?"

"I do. Although I have never set eyes on the man and he left no trace behind, it was not hard to narrow down the suspects because of his skill in forgery. The gentleman goes by several different names, but the one he was given at birth is Freddie Payne. His skills at counterfeiting cannot be equaled. He can produce a pound note that fools a seasoned banker. Letters or legal documents, such as the ones he used to trick my father, are even easier for the fiend to produce. Not only that, he is a master of disguise, and his schemes are as elaborate as they are brilliant."

"How is such a man ever to be caught?"

Adam heard the frustration in her voice and echoed it. "After five years, I have yet to determine a way. I have interviewed countless people who have met Payne. The only physical characteristic that he cannot hide is the pale-gray color of his eyes. The less tangible characteristics that I believe will ultimately lead to his downfall, however, are his overarching greed and his overconfidence. At some point, he will make a mistake, and I pray that when he does, either I or Hugh Toole will be there to witness it."

"Hugh Toole?"

"A Bow Street runner who is perhaps the only man alive who wishes Freddie Payne brought to justice more than I."

They stood in silence for a moment. In the distance, a bird sang and the faint sound of a horse's whinny reminded Adam that Oliver would be back with Miss Hadford's mount at any time.

"And so you see, Miss Hadford—"

"Phoebe," she said. "My name is Phoebe."

"And my name is Adam."

She bit her lip. "You are a baron. I am not sure that I should—"

"I am your friend—at least, I hope I am. I have not shared what I am telling you now with another soul. It is something that I would only tell a good friend." He raised one eyebrow and waited.

"We are friends," she confirmed softly.

"Very well." He began again. "And so you see, Phoebe, with no money to entertain and no fine clothing to wear, Emily and I became what some would term recluses. I left Dunsbourne Manor only when I heard news of another sighting of Freddie Payne, and every ounce of my remaining energy went into turning around our dire financial situation."

"Making the orchard into a money-making proposition," she said.

"The basic resources were here already. I needed only the mill and the horse to pull the millstone. It took a few years to purchase those things, but Henry and I used that time to nurture the trees and perfect the blend of apples for the best possible cider.

"That is the truth of the situation—even if few believe it. I did not realize what my withdrawal from Society had done to my reputation until you opened my eyes to it." He sighed. "You asked why I have not attempted to clear my name. First and foremost, I refuse to exchange my name for my father's. The former Lord Dunsbourne was an exceptional man. He suffered enough privately for the poor choice he made. He does not deserve any further taint to his reputation."

"But neither do you. And you are the one who must move forward in life. You and Emily. As a young lady, it is even more imperative that she come out from under the shadow of this terrible injustice. Lady Bloxley's influence can only go so far."

Adam managed a small smile. "I realized, too late, what you did for Emily with that introduction. Thank you for that."

"As I said before, Emily is fully deserving of a warm reception."

"She will need a Season in London," he said, unable to hide his grimace. "It occurred to me a few weeks ago that apprehending Freddie Payne could no longer be my focus. Emily is—and must always be—my priority."

"And so you had her enter Society wearing your mother's made-over dress."

He groaned. "It was awful."

"It was rather." She squeezed his hand and smiled. Warmth spread from his fingertips to his chest. "But the good news is that it shall never happen again."

"Ah, so says the young lady who is currently wearing her maid's attire."

A warning look flashed in her eyes. "One word more about my ankles and I shall no longer consider you my friend."

He laughed. It was a marvelous, wonderfully freeing feeling. He had

told Phoebe about his virtually penniless state and the man who had caused it, and yet, he could laugh. Up until this very moment, he had not thought those things could ever coexist.

The sound of a horse's hooves brought him back to his situation. He loosened his hold on Phoebe's hand. She slipped her fingers out from between his and stepped away. Missing her touch immediately, he extended his arm.

"My sleeve is dirty, but may I walk you out to your horse?"

Her cheeks turned the delightful color of pink that he was coming to love. "Seeing as my gloves are dirtier than they have ever been before, I fear the risk is greater for you, my lord."

"I am willing to take the chance," he said.

She smiled and set her hand upon his arm. "As am I."

Chapter 23

FREDDIE HAD BEEN TRAVELING THROUGH Berkshire's rolling hills for some time. The gradually fading light indicated that evening was coming on, and he knew he could not be far from Charwell Park. He watched the countryside go by through the window of his rented carriage. Not only did he need to keep up the appearance of a well-to-do gentleman, but he also needed a fast getaway vehicle. As soon as his business was completed with Mr. Hadford, he would be on his way. Being at the bank first thing in the morning was imperative. He knew from experience that both he and the money needed to be long gone before any questions arose about the transaction.

The rooftop of a familiar house came into view. Dunsbourne Manor. Freddie had not realized that Charwell Park and Dunsbourne Manor were located so close to each other. It was remarkable that the area could boast two overly trusting gentlemen with more money than sense. He leaned back in the upholstered seat with a satisfied smile. Lord Dunsbourne's deep coffers had enabled him to live in grand style for years. Once Mr. Hadford handed over his money, Freddie would be well on his way to enjoying those same luxuries again.

The carriage slowed and turned off the main thoroughfare and onto a gravel drive. Freddie watched as a large redbrick house came into view. He eyed the steady stream of smoke rising from several chimneys. It appeared that no expense was spared on heating the large house. He hoped the same could be said for the meal they planned to serve this evening.

Sliding the eye patch over his eye, he took a moment to reclaim his current role. Edward Trevors. Aged businessman and chronic gambler. Guilty of defrauding Willem den Haan. He cleared his throat, preparing to speak in a lower register. His stomach churned with excitement. Perhaps, had he not discovered a more profitable use for his considerable talents, he would have gone into the theatre. Playing a part was a thrill.

The carriage came to a stop before the shallow steps that led to the manor's wide front doors. Immediately, the doors opened, and Hadford appeared, a butler standing unobtrusively behind him. Freddie pressed his hat onto his wigged head and waited for the driver to open the carriage door. Then taking his cane in one hand, he slowly descended the vehicle.

"Mr. Trevors," Hadford said, stepping forward. "Welcome to Charwell Park."

"Good evening, Hadford. Very good of you to invite me."

"Of course." Hadford gestured toward the door and slowed his pace to match Freddie's uneven amble. "Please, come in."

They walked into a large hall. Marble tile covered the floor, and large paintings hung on the walls. A sweeping banister rail followed the wide staircase up to the next floor, and currently descending the stairs was a stunningly attractive young lady.

"Ah, Phoebe," Hadford said. "Come meet our guest."

The young lady glided down the remaining stairs in her lace and floral gown and joined them in the hall.

"Mr. Trevors, this is my daughter, Miss Phoebe Hadford. Phoebe, this is Mr. Trevors, joining us from London."

"A pleasure to meet you, sir." Miss Hadford inclined her head politely.

"Likewise," Freddie said, removing his hat and bowing.

The butler stepped up to take his cloak and hat, and Hadford led him into a beautifully appointed drawing room. Heavy damask curtains hung at the windows, the same pale green as the upholstery on some of the chairs. Silver candelabras sparkled on end tables and the mantelpiece, the candles already lit for the evening. Several paintings depicting seascapes decorated the walls. A general feeling of opulence hung over the room, and Freddie gloated at the thought of what he was about to do. He had no qualms about stealing from the Hadfords. They had more than enough to share.

A second lady, older than the first, sat on the sofa with a book open on her knee. She rose as they entered. Her hair was a little darker than Miss Hadford's, but the physical similarities between the two ladies were obvious.

"Mr. Trevors, may I introduce my wife, Mrs. Martha Hadford. My dear, this is Mr. Edward Trevors."

"Welcome to Charwell Park, Mr. Trevors," Mrs. Hadford said. "I hope your journey went well."

"Very well, thank you, ma'am." Freddie inclined his head.

"Would you like to freshen up before dinner?" she asked.

As tempted as Freddie was to enter another room and slip a small—but doubtless valuable—ornament into his pocket, he knew that his ultimate goal was of far more value. And he was anxious to begin the next phase of his grand scheme.

"I am well, Mrs. Hadford. My driver stopped to rest the horses not long ago, and I took the opportunity to stretch my legs." He patted his left thigh with his free hand. "Having to use a cane is an unfortunate turn of events, but I cannot complain. I am fortunate to be walking at all."

Mrs. Hadford looked suitably sorry. Extracting a little extra sympathy from his hostess was always a good ploy.

"I admire your resilience, sir," she said.

"Well, there we are. Such is life, I say." He focused his one visible eye on her. "I am happy to go in to dine whenever you are ready, ma'am."

Mrs. Hadford smiled and placed her hand upon her husband's arm.
"Then let us go in directly."

There was something about Mr. Trevors that made Phoebe excessively uneasy. It likely did not help that he had been seated across from her at the dining room table and that she had felt his gaze upon her more often than not. She had refrained from participating much in the mealtime conversation, preferring instead to listen. Her father had obviously been seeking information about Mr. Trevors's business connections abroad. Unfortunately, their guest had been remarkably unforthcoming. Phoebe was not sure that she knew much more about the gentleman now than she had when they had first met.

She stared at the needlework project on her knee with no real focus.

"Mother, what do you think of Mr. Trevors?"

Her mother sat on the sofa across from her. They had retired to the drawing room when the meal had ended, allowing the gentlemen their customary time alone.

"I feel rather sorry for the man," her mother said. "He obviously suffered quite severely in some battle or other and has no wife to aid him through the recovery."

"Or to tell him that white-powdered faces and excessive rouge are passé," Phoebe muttered.

Her mother pursed her lips. "Come now, Phoebe, it is not like you to pass such a harsh judgment."

Phoebe stabbed her needle into her stitchery with a little more force than necessary. "I know. It's just that there is something about him that does not sit well with me. Did you notice that he avoided all mention of his family or his home life? No reference to mutual friends and acquaintances?"

"It is quite possible that he has no surviving family. He appears to be of quite an age himself, and if he has never been married, he would have no children."

"Yes, but . . ." She shuddered. "I did not like the way he looked at me. It was as though he was trying to ascertain my thoughts."

"You are being overly dramatic, Phoebe. I daresay you are simply reacting badly to his having a patch over his eye." Her mother sighed. "Such a shame. His one good eye is such an unusual color. The pale gray is so very striking."

Phoebe's fingers froze over her stitchery, and her mouth went dry. Dear heaven. Mr. Trevors had pale-gray eyes. It had been over twenty-four hours since her stunning conversation with Adam, and she had thought of little else since then. From his heart-wrenching account of his father's demise to his battle to save his home; from the feel of his fingers around hers to his insistence that she call him by his given name; from his worry that Emily wouldn't survive in Society to his frustration that Freddie Payne was yet at large—every moment of their time together was indelibly imprinted in her mind. Including his

mention of the criminal's distinctive eyes.

She glanced over her shoulder. The drawing room door was ajar, but she had no doubt that the door to her father's study was closed tight. It would be almost impossible to eavesdrop on the gentlemen's conversation from the passageway. They were likely talking over matters of commerce that would mean nothing to her anyway. A horrible gaping pit opened up in Phoebe's stomach. If the older Lord Dunsbourne could be so fully deceived by Freddie Payne in a business transaction, what was to prevent her own father from suffering the same fate?

With trembling hands, she set down her needlework. What should she do? She could not very well knock on the door and demand to know if her father's guest was in actuality Freddie Payne. She swallowed past the dryness in her throat. No. She could not do that—but she knew someone else who could.

Her mother had gone back to her book. There was no question that she would not support Phoebe's galloping over to Dunsbourne Manor at this hour. She had made it quite clear that Phoebe had spent far too much time there already. And yet, it had to be done. The more she thought on it, the more convinced she became that it was her only course of action.

"Would you excuse me, Mother?" Phoebe rose to her feet, and her mother looked up with concern.

"Are you quite well, my dear? You appear terribly pale."

"I feel a bit shaky all of a sudden." That was no lie.

Her mother frowned. "Shall I call for Lucy?"

"She is probably already in my bedchamber, preparing the room for the night. I can make my own way there."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure."

The firmness of Phoebe's reply must have had some effect because the lines on her mother's brow eased.

"Very well. I shall make your excuses to the gentlemen."

"Yes, please do."

Phoebe maintained a sedate walk until she reached the hall, then she picked up her skirts and ran. She took the stairs faster than she'd ever taken them, arriving at her bedchamber in record time. Pushing open the door, she stumbled inside. Lucy was pulling down the covers of Phoebe's bed and gave a squeal of fright.

"Mercy, Miss Hadford! You scared me half to death."

"My cloak, Lucy!" she panted. "Quickly."

Her maid ran to the wardrobe and pulled out Phoebe's heavy traveling cloak. "If you're goin' out now, miss, you'll be wantin' this one."

Phoebe tossed it over her shoulders, her fingers fumbling with the

catch.

"If my mother should come asking after me, would you tell her that I am well and will see her in the morning?"

"Yes, miss," Lucy said, her eyes wide.

"Bless you. God willing, I shall be back very soon."

"Yes, miss," Lucy repeated, and then Phoebe raced back out of the room.

She took the servants' stairs, avoiding the main hall and Gresham standing guard at the front door. Slipping through the back door without being seen, she ran across the lawn to the yard and the stables. Darkness had fallen, but a faint light shone under the stable door. Phoebe pulled the door open and went inside. A young groom materialized from the shadows.

"Tom?"

"That's right, miss."

"I need you to saddle Aria as fast as you possibly can."

He was gone almost before she finished speaking, and within seconds, he was leading Phoebe's mare out of her stall.

"I'll 'ave her ready for you in no time, miss."

Phoebe watched, her anxiety mounting as the groom deftly saddled Aria and lifted a mounting block out from the corner. The challenge of riding sidesaddle in her evening gown was something she had not considered until now.

"I may need your help getting onto the saddle, Tom."

The young groom eyed her voluminous skirts warily. "I reckon yer best bet is to mount like you normally do, miss. Let them petticoats take care of themselves."

Phoebe could think of no viable alternative, so she stepped onto the block. Her skirts swished around her, and Aria shifted. Tom held the horse steady, and Phoebe reached for the pommel and pulled. Sheer desperation placed her in the saddle on her first try. As soon as her legs were situated, she took the reins.

"Will you be wantin' a lantern, miss?"

"No, thank you, Tom. The moonlight will be sufficient."

The clear skies of earlier today had continued into the night, and the moonlight had been bright enough to guide her safely from the house to the stables. She could only pray that it would be enough to show her the way to Dunsbourne Manor because she could not urge Aria into a gallop with a lantern swaying in her hand.

Tom hurried to the stable door and pushed it open. Phoebe urged Aria forward, and the horse trotted across the yard to the front of the house. Like an evil specter, the shadowy form of a large carriage loomed in the drive, and Phoebe's heart began to pound.

"Go, Aria," she whispered, touching her heels to her mare's sides. "Go

fast.”

Phoebe bent low over Aria’s neck. The gravel shifted and sprayed as they flew down the drive toward the road, but Phoebe had only one thought in mind: she must reach Adam before the gentleman currently in her father’s study disappeared in that waiting vehicle.

Chapter 24

ENSCONCED IN A COMFORTABLE CHAIR in front of the fire in Hadford's study, with a glass of fine brandy in his hand, Freddie was the picture of contentment. As was all too common in the forger's life, however, his appearance was deceptive. He was rapidly running out of patience and wanted nothing more than to take Hadford's money and quit the place.

How much longer was his host going to dissemble before he came to the true reason he had invited Mr. Trevors to Charwell Park? They had already discussed the high price of sugar, the shoddy conditions at the docks on the Thames, the unseasonably warm weather, and the shocking lack of experienced gardeners. Was Hadford hoping such small talk would cause him to lower his guard, or was the gentleman simply afraid to broach the difficult subject? Perhaps a nudge in the right direction was in order?

"How long have you done business in Amsterdam?" Freddie asked.

"Several years." Hadford abruptly rose from the chair he occupied opposite Freddie and walked over to his desk. He picked up a familiar letter and returned to his seat. Freddie's senses tingled. Success was so close he could smell it in the air.

"As a matter of fact," Hadford continued, "I asked you here because a Dutch associate reached out to ask for my assistance with a rather delicate matter." He handed the letter to Freddie. "Perhaps you would be so good as to read this."

Freddie kept his expression open and unsuspecting. He unfolded the correspondence and began reading the lines he already had memorized.

"Well now," he said when he had finished. "This rather changes things, does it not?"

"It does indeed." Hadford looked grim. "I am aware of your propensity for gambling, Mr. Trevors—and of how much it would damage your credibility amongst those of your ilk should word of your duplicity with Mr. den Haan reach them. May I suggest, therefore, that you pay my associate what you owe him now—before you leave my home—so that your reputation as a man of your word remains intact."

Freddie raised one eyebrow. He had not given Hadford enough credit. The gentleman was making his threat without so much as a slight tremor to his voice.

"Blackmail, Hadford? Is that what you are suggesting?"

Hadford shrugged. "Call it blackmail if you will. I would prefer to call it a reminder of the importance of dealing honorably with a decent man."

"Touché." The irony of Hadford's definition was not lost on Freddie. It

was all he could do not to grin.

"I have been told that you prefer to travel with cash on hand," Hadford said. "So I would suggest that you leave the amount you owe Mr. den Haan with me, and I shall ensure that he receives it forthwith."

"And what guarantee do I have that you will not simply pocket the money yourself?" Freddie blustered.

"My word as a gentleman."

There was no doubt about it. Hadford was good at this. His obvious integrity was almost enough to give Freddie pause. Almost. He patted his pocket as though searching for something.

"As much as I should like to consider that sufficient guarantee, Hadford, we are not so well acquainted as all that. I shall pay you half the amount today, and you may contact den Haan to tell him that the remaining five hundred will reach him within the fortnight."

"What assurance do I have that you will make good on the second installment?"

This time, Freddie could not contain his smile. "My word as a gentleman."

Hadford set his jaw. "That, sir, is already in question."

"It is the best I can offer you." Freddie withdrew a freshly minted one thousand pound note from his pocket and watched with satisfaction as Hadford's eyes widened in disbelief. "I have only this one note with me. Take it and give me back five hundred pounds. I have need of that amount before I leave Berkshire." He left the hint that he was headed to Ascot hanging between them.

Hadford had yet to reach for the note. "Leave the full one thousand pounds with me and you would leave here free of your debt."

So it was to be a battle of wills, was it? Poor Hadford stood no chance.

"Not so easily done, I fear," Freddie said. "As a businessman yourself, you know full well that it is unadulterated foolishness to invest everything in one place." He shrugged. "There are other creditors . . ."

He allowed the sentence to trail off.

Hadford's expression tightened. "Even if I wished to accommodate you, I do not have five hundred pounds in the house."

"But you have that amount in the bank."

"Of course."

"Then a check will suffice," Freddie said. He offered Hadford the one thousand pound note again. This time, the gentleman took it and walked to his desk.

"It will take me a few minutes to draw that up."

Freddie leaned back in his chair and crossed one leg over the other.

"Take whatever time you need."

Adam jotted down the last of this week's expenses in his ledger and closed the book with a sigh. One day, he would do this without feeling as though he were walking a tightrope. He prayed that day would be sooner rather than later.

Pushing his chair back from the desk, he stood and walked to the window. Already, the silhouettes of trees and shrubs were barely visible in the darkness. Sunset had forced him out of the cart shed earlier today than it had only a week ago. The shortening of the days was a double-edged sword. As reluctant as he was to lose an extra hour or two of work, it had felt good to take the time to bathe and actually dress for dinner this evening after so many days of eating in his work clothes only to fall into bed immediately afterward. Voices in the hall beyond the study's closed door drew his attention. He recognized Thompson's steady cadence, but the female he was speaking with sounded distressed. He frowned. Emily had already retired to her room, which undoubtedly meant that Miss Glover had done the same. Surely Mrs. Foster would not be causing such a ruckus at this hour.

There was a knock at the door.

"Enter," Adam said.

Thompson appeared in the doorway. "Begging your pardon, my lord, but Miss Hadford is here and wishes to speak with you. She claims it is most urgent."

Miss Hadford. Adam's heartbeat quickened. What on earth had brought Phoebe to Dunsbourne Manor this late in the day?

"Have her come in."

Thompson had barely turned around when the lady in question brushed past him and ran across the room toward Adam.

"My lord." She was out of breath. A traveling cloak covered her evening gown, but she wore no hat, and her hair was falling out of its pins in a disheveled cloud around her distraught face.

He reached for her arm to steady her. "My dear Phoebe, whatever is the matter?" Vaguely aware of Thompson closing the door behind him, Adam guided Phoebe to the closest chair. "Please, take a seat." "I cannot." Panic filled her eyes, and she backed away. "There is no time. We must leave now. Before it is too late."

Adam's unease burgeoned. He had never seen Phoebe so agitated.

"Too late for what?"

"To catch Freddie Payne."

Adam froze. "What did you say?"

Phoebe brushed her tangled curls back from her face and took an unsteady breath. "There is a gentleman named Edward Trevors currently with my father in his study. He arrived from London this afternoon and ate dinner with us. His face is covered in white powder

and rouge, and he wears a white wig and an eye patch.” She looked at him—her expression a mixture of uncertainty and dread. “There is something about him that sets me on edge, and his one visible eye is pale gray.”

“Pale gray,” Adam repeated. “You are sure?”

“Completely and horribly.”

In four steps, Adam was at his desk. Two more had him withdrawing his pistol from the lower drawer. “What business does this visitor have with your father?”

“I do not know. But if he truly is Freddie Payne, it cannot be anything good.”

“Of that there is no doubt.” Fear for Mr. Hadford and his family tightened Adam’s throat. He would not wish the agony he had endured the last few years on anyone—especially not friends and neighbors.

He took her elbow and steered her toward the door. “How did you come?”

“I rode Aria. She is waiting outside.”

Adam would not think on the danger she had faced in coming to fetch him alone in the dark. One unseen root or divot in the ground and she would have been thrown.

“Thompson,” Adam called across the main hall.

The butler appeared, Adam’s hat and cloak already in his hands.

“I need my horse brought around by the time I have helped Miss Hadford into her saddle.”

“Right away, my lord.” He handed Adam his clothing and disappeared.

“Come,” Adam said, slipping his cloak over his shoulders and pressing his hat to his head as he walked Phoebe through the doors.

The faint light coming from the house extended just far enough to see that Aria had meandered from the front steps to the nearby lawn.

When Phoebe appeared on the top step, the horse looked up from her grazing, her eyes shining in the darkness. Adam hurried down the remaining steps, felt for the leather straps trailing the ground, and led the horse back to Phoebe.

“Quickly, Adam,” she said.

Already, he could hear the clatter of hooves crossing the yard from the stables. He released the horse’s straps and moved closer to Phoebe.

Without a word, he placed his hands around her tiny waist, and in one swift motion, he lifted her onto the saddle. Her legs were lost in a mass of petticoats, and she slid back slightly before reaching for the reins.

“Are you seated correctly?” he asked.

“As well as can be expected in this ridiculous gown.”

He grunted. If Phoebe's choice of attire did not kill her first, it would likely kill him. Every time he saw her, she appeared more beautiful than the last—windswept hair notwithstanding.

Oliver rounded the house, leading Adam's horse at a run. Adam went to meet him, and when the groom caught sight of him in the gloom, he brought the stallion to a halt long enough to allow Adam to mount before tossing him the reins. A few yards away, the shifting of gravel was Adam's only warning that Phoebe was leaving. Seconds later, Aria's hooves pounded down the drive, her rider bent low in her saddle. Adam did not hesitate. He touched his heels to his stallion's side and tore after her.

Phoebe's heart pounded in unison with Aria's hooves. Would they be in time? Was she correct about her father's guest? What if, after all this, the gentleman truly was an eccentric war hero by the name of Edward Trevors? She gritted her teeth as another gust of wind tugged at her cloak and hair. No. She was putting her trust in her instincts, and until she was proven wrong, she would heed them.

The large oak tree that marked the start of Charwell Park's drive materialized in the moonlight. She glanced over her shoulder. Adam was at her right. He had kept his horse a nose behind hers the entire ride, matching her pace and following her lead as she navigated the twisting lane that connected their houses.

"The Charwell Park entrance is up ahead," she called.

He did not reply, but his horse dropped back another couple of feet. She followed suit, slowing Aria's gallop to a brisk trot as they turned off the road.

For the first part of the drive, the trees obscured her view of the house, but when she reached the last bend, the vista opened up. The large house stood with candles flickering at half a dozen windows and a lantern at the door—but no dark shadow stood before the front steps. The spot where the carriage had waited was empty.

"He's gone," Phoebe cried. "We are too late."

For one desperate moment, she considered swinging Aria around and racing after the carriage. There was a possibility that she could catch it before it reached the London road. But Adam's voice cut into her frantic thoughts.

"We must find your father."

They raced the last two hundred yards to the front of the house. Adam reached it first and was out of his saddle before she reined Aria to a stop. He stepped up beside her and extended his arms. She dropped into them and then broke free, stumbling up the steps and into the house.

"Father!" she called, running toward the study. Gresham appeared, his startled gaze moving from her to the gentleman following in her wake. But Phoebe did not stop to explain. She reached her father's study and gave a brief rap on the door before pushing it open.

Her father looked up from behind his desk. "Phoebe! What is the meaning of this commotion?" His attention slid to the gentleman entering the room behind her, and he rose to his feet, astonishment curtailing his reprimand. "Lord Dunsbourne."

"Hadford." Adam moved farther into the room. "Forgive the discourteous interruption, but to be brief—because time is of the essence—what can you tell me of the gentleman who was recently with you?"

"Mr. Trevors? We conducted a small matter of private business, and

then he left.” Her father’s confused gaze went from Adam to Phoebe and back again. “May I ask what this is all about?”

Phoebe stepped forward, her hands clenched to stop from wringing them. “Please, Father, we do not have time for lengthy explanations. Did you or did you not give Mr. Trevors any money?”

Her father’s expression was growing more and more concerned. “I wrote him a check, but it was for half the amount he gave me.”

“Let me guess,” Adam said. “He had a single bank note in his pocket, which he asked you to break. As you did not have sufficient funds on hand, he accepted a hand-written check for an exorbitantly large amount instead.”

“Why, yes.”

Adam muttered a curse and paced to the fireplace and back. “How long ago did the scoundrel leave?”

“The scoundrel?” Her father picked up a slip of paper from the desk and showed it to Adam. “He did not rob me, my lord. He gave me a one thousand pound note.”

“If Mr. Trevors is really who your daughter thinks he is,” Adam said, “then that bank note is a forgery, and he has most certainly robbed you.”

Her father paled. “Who do you think he is, Phoebe?”

“Freddie Payne.”

It was obvious from her father’s stunned expression that he had heard the name before. “The notorious forger?”

“The forger, master of disguise, thief, felon—take your pick,” Adam said. “He is all those and more. I have been attempting to bring him to justice for five years. There is no one more slippery.” He paced across the room and back once more. “He has tried a similar scheme before. I assume someone else—a gentleman you do not know well—put you up to it and gave you all the details you needed to know about Mr. Trevors.”

Phoebe’s father dropped into his chair and stared at the note he held in his shaking fingers. “But there was a letter. Written in den Haan’s hand and sealed with den Haan’s crest.”

“As you said yourself, he is a master forger.”

Her father ran his unsteady hand across his face. “Dear heavens. What have I done? I cannot afford to lose five hundred pounds.”

Phoebe staggered back a pace. Five hundred pounds. That was more than many gentlemen made in a year. How would her father ever recover from so big a blow? She glanced at Adam, her admiration for the even greater battle he had fought—and looked to win—swelling within her breast.

“You have not lost it yet, sir.” Determination rang through Adam’s voice.

“He is gone, and he has taken the check with him.”

“True. But the check is worthless if he is unable to withdraw funds with it.” Adam set his hands on the desk and leaned forward so he was eye to eye with Phoebe’s father. “If we reach your bank before Payne does, you can stop the payment.” He paused. “And I can finally put my search for the man who destroyed my father to rest.”

Her father appeared to draw strength from Adam’s resolve. Folding the counterfeit note, he slid it into his pocket and rose to his feet. He rounded the desk and started for the door with purpose in his stride.

“We must leave immediately. I will call for the carriage. Phoebe, if you would be good enough to tell your mother that I was called away on urgent business, I would be most grateful.”

“Yes, Father.”

He turned to Adam. “It seems that you share an unpleasant history with Freddie Payne, my lord. I shall look forward to hearing the particulars during our ride to London.”

Myriad emotions crossed Adam’s face, finally settling on relief. “I pray that our respective experiences will give us the insights necessary to catch the man, sir.”

“As do I,” Phoebe’s father said fiercely. Then he marched out of the room, calling for Gresham.

“I shall have a groom stable your mount here. You can collect him when you return,” Phoebe said before Adam could speak. “And I will write to Emily first thing in the morning so she knows you have gone to London with my father.”

“Thank you for that. I am sure Oliver will get word to Henry at the cart shed.”

It was the first time Phoebe had considered how this unexpected trip might impact the cider production.

“But what of your work there?”

He offered her a rueful smile. “I daresay it will go on without me for a day or two.”

“Dunsbourne!” her father’s voice reached them from the main hall.

She met his eyes. “I am grateful to you for believing my wild ranting and for going with my father. Please be careful.”

He reached out and tucked a wayward curl behind her ear. “If this ends as I hope it will, it is I who will be forever grateful to you.” His fingers moved to gently brush her cheek, but before she could collect herself, he was gone, the echo of his rapid footsteps merging with the racing of her heart.

Chapter 25

THE GRAY LIGHT OF DAWN was filtering through the fog blanketing London when the Hadfords' carriage rolled up in front of the Bow Street Magistrate's office. The location was all too familiar to Adam but not so for Mr. Hadford.

"Will anyone be available to answer the door at this hour in the morning?" Mr. Hadford asked.

"The night watchman will be about," Adam said. "I will leave a message with him for Toole."

Adam and Mr. Hadford had spent a good deal of their journey from Charwell Park discussing Adam's extensive study of Freddie Payne's methods and victims. The release Adam had felt in telling Phoebe of his family's loss at Payne's hands was magnified tenfold as he shared the details of his personal quest to root out the felon with Mr. Hadford. The gentleman had proven to be a sympathetic listener, and their discussion had been a poignant reminder to Adam of how much he missed counseling with his own father.

Having learned of Hugh Toole's heavy involvement in Payne's case, Mr. Hadford had suggested that they stop at Bow Street to enlist his help. Adam had readily agreed. Toole would be an invaluable ally at the bank—so long as he was in town.

Adam let himself out of the carriage and hurried up the steps to the black door leading to the magistrate's office. Reaching for the brass knocker, he let it fall twice. He waited. It was not long before heavy footsteps reached him through the door and the sound of the bolt being drawn back was quickly followed by the squeak of the door's hinges.

"Good morning, Albert." Adam refused to dwell upon the fact that he had visited this place in the dark often enough to know the night watchman by name.

"Morning, m' lord. How can I 'elp you?"

"I have a message for Mr. Toole. Is he expected in today?"

"As far as I know. But Mr. Toole don't always let us know 'is plans till they're over."

Adam's chest tightened. If there was one day Toole needed to show up, it was today. "Can you reach him at home—before office hours?"

"Not officially."

Adam bit back a smile. Perhaps there was an advantage to knowing the night watchman after all.

"I see. Well, should you know of anyone willing to take an unofficial walk—or even a run—to Mr. Toole's lodgings within the next half an hour, have them tell the gentleman that Lord Dunsbourne expects Freddie Payne to be at the bank on Threadneedle Street when it opens

this morning.”

Albert’s eyebrows shot up. One could not work for the Bow Street runners without recognizing certain names.

“The bank on Threadneedle Street, first thing this morning,” Albert repeated. “It seems like there might be someone ’round ’ere needing some exercise in the next few minutes. I daresay I can steer ’im in the right direction.”

“Thank you, Albert.”

“Good day, m’ lord.”

Adam returned to the carriage, and Mr. Hadford wasted no time.

“What news?”

“Someone will get word to Toole. He will be there before the bank opens.”

Mr. Hadford consulted his pocket watch. “That is in less than an hour, and the man has yet to be reached.”

“We are dealing with runners,” Adam reminded him.

The carriage started moving again, and Mr. Hadford remained silent, tension obvious in the lines on his face. “I cannot afford to lose five hundred pounds, Dunsbourne.”

“I understand.” This was not the time to tell the gentleman how much greater his father’s loss had been. “When we reach the bank, your priority will be to have the manager freeze all payments on checks written against your account. Mine will be to connect with Toole and watch for our criminal.”

“Payne is outnumbered, and we have surprise on our side.” Mr.

Hadford spoke as though he were trying to convince himself that the odds were in their favor. In theory, they were. Unfortunately, Freddie Payne was not known for conforming to theories.

Freddie took one last look in the mirror. He had made good use of the hour he'd had since returning his rented carriage and walking the short distance to his London lodgings. All trace of face powder and paint was gone, along with the white wig and beauty patch. His natural hair—a useful, nondescript brown color—fell to his shoulders, and his black jacket and tan breeches were unremarkable enough to avoid attention. He straightened his cravat and gave his reflection a satisfied nod. It was time.

He opened a large trunk in the corner of the room and set his oversized red coat and eye patch on top of the other costumes folded within. A quick glance around the room satisfied him that all evidence of Edward Trevors's existence was safely hidden away, so he pressed the lid closed and locked the trunk. He tucked the small key into his pocket beside Hadford's check, and then he picked up his hat and gloves. Pressing his hat onto his head so the wide brim kept his eyes in shadow, he left his rooms and set off on foot for Threadneedle Street.

The sounds of an awakening city greeted him: the trundle of wagon wheels and the clip-clop of horses' hooves, the call of street vendors and merchants—all punctuated by the occasional bark of a dog or cry of a seagull. Freddie inhaled deeply. He loved the sooty smell of the city. It meant people—lots of people—and that opened up a world of possibilities for someone like him.

The bells of St. Stephen's rang, marking the nine o'clock hour and the beginning of another day of business. Freddie quickened his pace and turned the corner onto Threadneedle Street. As far as he was concerned, every worthwhile business day began with a large withdrawal from someone else's bank account.

Maintaining a neutral expression and an unhurried stride, he joined the steady stream of people filing up the steps and through the arched doorway into the bank. Inside, the floor was tiled, and the vaulted ceiling made the lobby appear cavernous. Bankers sat in a row along the length of the room, their faces distorted by the wooden grill separating them from their customers. Despite the early hour, men and women milled around the room, some of them moving purposefully, others standing, waiting their turn to speak with someone.

Freddie paused long enough to scan the row of bankers. The most youthful, inexperienced teller was always his first choice. A young man with round spectacles perched on the end of his pimpled nose caught his attention. He was currently helping a woman with a little boy at her side, and although he was sitting between two white-haired gentlemen, he had yet to confer with either of them. Perfect. New but not so new as to need assistance. Freddie moved to stand across from

the young banker and prepared to wait his turn.

The sensation that he was being watched began as an inkling and quickly mushroomed into a certainty. Keeping his head low, he twisted to the right and scanned that side of the room. An elderly lady stood beside the main doors, her gaze directed his way. A dark-haired gentleman dressed in a blue jacket stood beside one of the pillars. His attention was directed elsewhere, but there was something uncomfortably familiar about his stance. Freddie searched his memory but could not place him.

Adjusting his position so he could survey the left side of the room, he noted a group of three gentlemen talking together. Occasionally, one of them would look in his direction, but none of them showed undue interest. Behind them, another man was partially blocked by a second pillar. Freddie's unease grew. Did the gentleman not wish to be seen? A door opened at the far end of the room, and two gentlemen entered the lobby and began walking toward him.

"I appreciate your promptness in bringing this matter to our attention, sir. Be assured, your funds remain untouched, and I will see to it that any checks written against your account are refused." The bald-headed man's voice was loud enough to carry.

"Very good. And please advise your employees that until this matter is fully settled, all my banking will be done in person. Any transactions done otherwise are to be treated with suspicion."

Freddie stood completely still, barely breathing. Hadford. He was sure of it. He had spoken with the man long enough yesterday to pick up on his inflection. But how had he reached London so fast? And more to the point, why was he at the bank so early in the morning?

Freddie's mind replayed the conversation he had just overheard, and the first tendrils of fear took hold. He knew. Somehow, Hadford had discovered Freddie's ruse.

Forcing himself to wait until Hadford and the bank manager had passed by, Freddie sidled up to a young lady who was headed toward the door. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the gentleman who had been hidden by the second pillar step around it and advance his way. Toole. Freddie kept his steps even until he reached the first pillar. The dark-haired man was watching his approach with an attentiveness that placed Freddie on high alert. Toole was not working alone. Freddie glanced at the doorway. He was within ten yards of it now. He took a small step to the left, and Toole began to run.

"That's him, Dunsbourne! Stop him!"

The dark-haired man lunged forward. Freddie swerved and barreled directly into the young woman. Pushing her into the path of his pursuer, he dashed for the exit. He heard her cry and the gentleman's exclamation as she fell, but Freddie did not turn around. The bank

doors opened to admit another customer, and Freddie shoved the unsuspecting gentleman out of the way, racing past him and leaping down the steps to the pavement. Shouts of consternation filled the air as he tore down the street, and the pounding of footsteps followed. Darting into an alley, he struggled to visualize the nearby roads as he wove around the large potholes littering the ground. Cornhill Road would give him the greatest access to hackney carriages, and that would be his best means of escape. Veering left, he cut through the unkempt yards of three or four businesses before joining a second alley that connected to the main road.

Behind him, men shouted instructions, and the thunder of feet continued. The brick walls on either side of him gave way as the alley opened onto Cornhill Road. Looking to the left and then the right, he spotted a hackney turning onto the road. He ran toward it and raised his arm to alert the driver. The old man pulled on the reins.

"Don't stop," Freddie yelled. "I'm late."

Giving him a troubled look, the driver slowed enough for Freddie to grasp the door handle whilst still running. "Charing Cross Coaching Inn," Freddie panted. "As fast as you can get there." Yanking on the door, he pulled it open and leaped inside. He had the door closed behind him as the first of his pursuers appeared at the mouth of the alley.

The dark-haired gentleman shouted at the hackney driver, but the old man was either too deaf to hear or unwilling to take another passenger. Toole joined him, and both took chase, but the carriage was picking up speed, and seconds later, they were hidden from view by a bend in the road.

Freddie moved away from the window and threw himself against the seat cushion. Dunsbourne. As soon as he'd heard the name, he'd known why the dark-haired man looked familiar. He was a younger, taller version of the poor sop Freddie had tricked out of his entire fortune. Freddie uttered a string of colorful swear words as his anger boiled. He should have learned exactly where Hadford lived before targeting him. There could be no doubt that his neighbor, Dunsbourne, was the one who had alerted the gentleman to his subterfuge. He was the one to blame for the failure of Freddie's well-laid plans; he was the one who would ultimately regret it. Freddie already knew exactly where to locate Dunsbourne. He would strike before the gentleman was ready—and there would be no recovery.

“Blast it all!” Adam bent over, his hands on his thighs as he battled to catch his breath. He had been closing in on Payne before the hackney had appeared—almost near enough to draw the pistol in his pocket. For a few ludicrous seconds, he’d even held out hope that he could catch the carriage before it sped up again. He was a fool.

“Every time, Toole! How does he evade us every time?”

The Bow Street runner had caught up to him as the carriage had disappeared around the bend, and he was staring after the missing vehicle.

“This time’s different, my lord. You mark my words.”

“Enlighten me.” Adam could not rid himself of his frustration that fast.

“As I see it, he escaped again.”

“He did that. But there’s a few new twists this time.” Toole turned and began walking back the way they had come. Adam fell into step with him. “First off, he didn’t get the money—and he’s going to be fuming over that for a bit. Second, you and I got a pretty good look at him. I know he’s one to change his appearance at the drop of a hat, but I reckon what we saw today was the real Freddie Payne—and that’s going to rattle him. And third, I’m going to ask old Joe Lambeth exactly where he dropped off the passenger who was in such a hurry this morning.”

“Who is Joe Lambeth?”

“He’s the man currently driving Freddie Payne out of our reach.”

Adam stared at him. “You recognized the driver?”

Toole shrugged. “In my line of work, it pays to know the fellows who pick people up and drop people off around town. They’re an extra set of eyes and ears when I need them.”

Adam ran his fingers through his hair, trying to make sense of this new development. They had reached the alley that led back to Threadneedle Street.

“So where do we go from here?”

“Well, the way I see it, an angry gent doesn’t think straight, and a scared one takes risks. Right now, Payne is both those things. We’ve got him on the run, and I’m counting on the fact that he’s going to do something foolish—something he hasn’t planned out as well as he usually does. With old Joe’s assistance, I’ll know where to start looking.”

“What can I do to help?”

“Go home.”

“You cannot be serious. You know how long I have wanted to see Payne behind bars. I will not walk away now.”

Toole stopped and turned to face him. “The Lord Dunsbourne I know would not have gone this whole time without showing some concern for the lady Payne pushed to the floor in the bank or thought to ask

what happened to Mr. Hadford back there. If you'll forgive me for saying so, my lord, your state of mind is not so very different from Freddie Payne's at the moment. And as much as I wish him to do something foolish, I do not want you doing the same."

Guilt washed over Adam—along with an unexpected dose of gratitude. He had needed the reminder of where his priorities should lie. "You are a good man, Hugh Toole."

The runner gave a crooked smile. "Honesty gets me into trouble more often than not, my lord, but I can't seem to rid myself of it."

They continued toward the bank. People had gathered on the steps, their murmured words growing louder as Adam and Toole approached. Mr. Hadford separated himself from the group closest to the door and hurried down the stairs to meet them.

"What happened?"

"He hailed a hackney and got away," Adam said.

Mr. Hadford's shoulders dropped. "I knew I would be of no use to you in a foot race, so I stayed back to help the poor woman whom he tossed aside. But I really hoped . . ." His words trailed off.

"Yes. We all did."

Adam worked to keep the bitterness out of his voice. It would do no good to dwell on how close they had come this time. There would be another. And if Toole were right, it would come sooner rather than later.

"How is the lady who fell?" Toole asked.

"She has recovered from her initial shock. There will be bruises, no doubt, but as far as can be ascertained without a doctor examining her, no bones are broken."

That, at least, was good news.

"I am relieved to hear it," Adam said.

Toole eyed the crowd standing outside the bank with a frown. The numbers were growing.

"Am I correct in thinking your banking work is complete, sir?" he asked.

"It is," Mr. Hadford said. "Thankfully, the manager, Mr. Potts, took down all the particulars before Payne made a dash for it."

"Then might I suggest that you and Lord Dunsbourne make a hasty retreat? At this point, the fewer people who know exactly what happened or who was involved, the better. I can speak with those in authority at the bank, but I think we all have more important things to do than to linger here."

"Agreed." Adam wanted Toole and his colleagues searching for Joe Lambeth and following whatever clues the old driver may have regarding Payne's whereabouts as quickly as possible. And the sooner he was back working in the cart shed the better. He had learned long

ago that physical labor was his best medicine for disappointment. Mr. Hadford's eyebrows rose a fraction. It was the only indication he gave of surprise at Adam's compliant response. "Very well. We can go directly from here to my carriage." He inclined his head toward the Bow Street runner. "Under different circumstances, it would have been a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Toole."

"Likewise, Mr. Hadford."

"Keep me informed, Toole," Adam said.

"You may count on it, my lord."

Adam gave a reluctant smile. It was true. And that is why he could leave and let the runner continue to follow the clues without him.

Adam knew he could fully rely on Hugh Toole.

Chapter 26

“PHOEBE, I FORBID YOU FROM circling this room one more time.”

Phoebe’s mother pressed her fingers to her temples. “You are making my head spin.”

“I am sorry, Mother.”

Phoebe dropped into the nearest chair and began smoothing out her gown around her. It was a futile exercise. The pale blue muslin would be wrinkled by evening regardless of how she treated it, but the repetitive action gave her something mindless to do. And that was all she was good for this afternoon.

She had not even been aware that she was pacing the room. Her thoughts had been far away from the Charwell Park drawing room. They had been in London with her father and Adam. All night and all day, she had kept a silent prayer in her heart that nothing untoward would happen to the gentlemen, and that they would reach the bank in time to stop Freddie Payne from following through with his dastardly plan.

Not wanting to burden her mother unduly, Phoebe had told her only that her father and Lord Dunsbourne had been called away on urgent business. If her mother thought it strange that the gentlemen had left together, she did not mention it. Phoebe had been similarly vague in the letter she had sent to Emily this morning. But her friend knew that only the direst need would take Adam from the cart shed this week, and Phoebe could not help but believe that Emily would worry over his sudden and unexpected departure.

“I do not know what has come over you today.” Her mother was not yet ready to put Phoebe’s distracted behavior behind her. “It’s not like you to completely ignore your stitchery or your magazines.”

Phoebe’s stomach clenched. She could no more concentrate on intricate stitches now than on learning a new language. And the thought of spending her time on something so trivial as studying the latest fashion plates made her feel ill. Why had she ever thought that activity was a good use of her time?

“It must be that I have grown so accustomed to being outdoors at Dunsbourne Manor that I do not know quite what to do with myself in the house,” she said, her explanation at least partially true.

“Well, you must reacquaint yourself with indoor activities then,” her mother said. “Especially as it will not be long before the weather precludes you from going outside at all.”

“Of course.” Phoebe rose to her feet again. “I should have thought of it before. I shall take a walk while the sun still shines, and when I return, I will undoubtedly be ready to sit quietly.”

Her mother pursed her lips. Phoebe’s solution was evidently not what

she had intended. But before she could offer an alternate suggestion, a knock sounded on the drawing room door and Gresham entered.

“Mr. Derrick Webb is here to see Miss Hadford, ma’am.”

Her mother had the decency to pause before responding. She glanced at Phoebe, who shook her head frantically.

“I refuse to be rude to a good neighbor simply to appease your unproven notions, Phoebe,” she said quietly. “Mr. Webb has done nothing to deserve our disdain.”

Phoebe clasped her hands together tightly. “I believe he has.”

“What, pray tell?”

“He openly spreads malicious gossip whilst hiding his own vices from the world.”

“My dear, there is not a lady or gentleman in Society who does not have at least one vice, and tattling is as natural as breathing within the ton.”

“Please, Mother,” Phoebe begged. “I do not wish to speak with Mr. Webb.”

“Nonsense. You have always enjoyed social interactions. The gentleman’s visit will be just the thing to distract you from your current restlessness.” She turned back to the butler. “Invite Mr. Webb into the drawing room, Gresham.”

The butler bowed. “Yes, ma’am.”

Phoebe closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Surely all those tedious comportment lessons she had endured in her youth had prepared her for navigating a visit from a disagreeable gentleman. She could be polite for half an hour—for her mother’s sake. But if the conceited gentleman made one derogatory statement about Lord Dunsbourne or his sister, so help her, she would not hold back. Mr. Webb appeared in the doorway, and her mother stood to greet him.

“Mr. Webb, what a lovely surprise.”

He bowed. “Mrs. Hadford. Miss Hadford. I hope you do not mind my coming unannounced.”

“Of course not,” her mother said. “Please join us, and I shall call for tea.”

Phoebe reclaimed her chair, relieved when their guest took the one opposite rather than beside her.

“I have not seen you for some time, Miss Hadford,” Mr. Webb said. “I hope you are well.”

“Quite well, thank you.”

“I did stop by a few days ago, but you were unavailable. Perhaps your mother mentioned it?”

“She did.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Phoebe saw her mother frown. Phoebe’s

succinct answers to Mr. Webb's questions were clearly not to her mother's liking.

Stifling a sigh, Phoebe made a little more effort. "How is Marianne?" "Well enough, I believe. She entertained Miss Chapman for tea earlier this week and was on a quest for more ribbons this morning."

"Did you drive her down to the milliner's shop in your curricule, then?" For the first time since he'd entered the room, Mr. Webb appeared uncomfortable. "No. As a matter of fact, I no longer own the vehicle. It really was not all it was touted to be, so I sent it back to the original owner."

Sent it, sold it, or lost it in another wager, Phoebe wondered. It was hard to imagine the gentleman relinquishing a vehicle he had been so taken with unless it had been a forced decision.

"How did you come to Charwell Park today, Mr. Webb?" Phoebe's mother entered the conversation.

"By horse, ma'am. My current mount is a stallion quite well known within England's racing circles."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, indeed. He has several ribbons to show for it." Mr. Webb's arrogance was back, and Phoebe had an irrational desire to douse it.

"Did you see him run at Ascot?" she asked. "I did hear that you frequent the place often."

She recognized the shock in his eyes before he blanketed the emotion with a smooth smile. "As a matter of fact, the first time I set eyes upon him, he finished head and shoulders ahead of his nearest competitor in a seven-furloughs race. That was when I determined to claim him as my own."

A footman arrived with a tea tray and then slipped away silently. Her mother began pouring the hot brew into the delicate china cups. She handed the first to Phoebe and the next to Mr. Webb. Phoebe took a small sip. She had little interest in horse racing, and if her mother did not contribute more to the conversation soon, she and Mr. Webb would quickly run out of things to say.

She looked to her mother and raised an eyebrow. Her mother took the hint.

"Mr. Hadford has not had an opportunity to attend Ascot since we moved here, but I daresay most gentlemen enjoy the races."

It was not the change of subject Phoebe had hoped for, but it was something.

"True," Mr. Webb said. "Although, I must say, not many come away with sufficient funds to purchase the winning racehorse."

There it was. Her mother had unwittingly opened the door on Mr. Webb's weakness, and the braggart had been unable to help himself. He had all but admitted to betting on the races.

Phoebe set her cup and saucer down on the nearby end table. "That would certainly take a lot of money," she said. "You must place a great deal down on each race."

Phoebe could almost see the conflict churning within him as he sought the best way out of his present predicament. If he admitted to winning large amounts often, he simultaneously admitted to gambling large amounts often. If he denied it, he lost all boasting privileges.

"I believe there is one gentleman within our community who has lost an enormous amount."

Phoebe could scarcely believe her ears. Mr. Webb had completely evaded the issue of his own complicity in high-stakes gambling by pointing his finger elsewhere. Her mother shifted uneasily, and Phoebe straightened her spine. If her mother had picked up on that not-so-subtle jab, it was certain that anyone else would do the same. It was time to put a stop to Mr. Webb's lies—even if she had to resort to using his tactics.

"I assume you are referring to Lord Dunsbourne," she said.

His eyes widened at her direct approach. "It is no secret that he is penniless."

"That may be true, but do you not think it odd that the rumor claiming he lost everything in a game of chance has been propagated so fully even though he has no record of gambling?" She fixed him with a pointed look. "Indeed, I have it on the best authority that during his schooldays, he showed no interest in making wagers even though an acquaintance from this very neighborhood was known to be a habitual gamester."

The smile had slipped from Mr. Webb's face. Phoebe acted as though she had not noticed.

"Of course, I have noticed that those who perpetuate mistruths about others often do so as a way of deflecting negative attention away from themselves."

Her mother's teaspoon rattled against her cup. A sure sign that her hand was shaking. "I believe it can also be said that truth almost always rises to the fore eventually," her mother said in her most placating tone.

"I could not agree more, Mother. And I daresay the truth will win out eventually in Lord Dunsbourne's case. Although I cannot help but think that it would be better for everyone involved if the lies were disavowed before those who continue to spread them are uncovered and undone." She paused and met Mr. Webb's edgy look with an unflinching stare. "What are your thoughts, Mr. Webb?"

"My thoughts, Miss Hadford?" He cleared his throat and reached into his pocket for his timepiece. After a quick glance at its face, he dropped it back inside his vest and pinned a smile to his face. It was

not his usual self-assured smirk, and for a fleeting moment, Phoebe felt sorry for him. The emotion did not last long. "My thoughts are that if Lord Dunsbourne can ever rub two coins together, he would be well advised to take them with him to Ascot. A decent wager is the only way he will ever recoup his losses."

A vision of Adam in his shirtsleeves, pouring apples into the mill trough, with sweat upon his brow, entered Phoebe's thoughts, and she knew without a doubt that he would rather work shoulder to shoulder with Henry and Oliver for the rest of his life than risk losing his home in a bet. And in that moment of insight, she came to another startling realization: she would prefer to be in the cart shed beside Adam than at the finest of balls with anyone else.

Mr. Webb came to his feet. "I believe I must be off, Mrs. Hadford. I thank you for your hospitality."

"Of course, Mr. Webb." Her mother rose, her face pale. "Please give my regards to your mother."

"I shall." He inclined his head toward her and then to Phoebe. "Miss Hadford. Our discussion has been most enlightening."

Phoebe's new awareness of her feelings for Adam had set her emotions in a whirl, and a sensible response was beyond her. Thankfully, it seemed that Mr. Webb did not expect one. In a daze, she watched him walk out of the room, and as the closing of the front door reverberated from the main hall, she prepared herself for a tongue-lashing.

"Well. That did not go as I had hoped," her mother said.

"I tried to warn you, Mother."

Her mother moved to sit beside her and studied her carefully. "You truly do not care for the man, do you?"

"No, Mother. I do not. Quite apart from his conceited nature, I think it is most likely that Mr. Webb is the originator and the propagator of the awful rumors that have plagued Lord Dunsbourne and Miss Norton for years."

Her mother considered Phoebe's assertion. "I would agree that Mr. Webb seems to have little good to say about the baron." She fiddled with a piece of lace at her sleeve. "Nevertheless, your father seems to trust Lord Dunsbourne."

"Yes," Phoebe said. "As do I."

Her mother was still pondering. "After all, your father would not have traveled all the way to London with the baron if he harbored doubts as to the gentleman's character, would he?"

Phoebe allowed herself a small smile. She had seen her mother work through her thoughts like this many times before.

"I am quite sure Father would side with Lord Dunsbourne on this matter."

Her mother nodded. "Well then, if both of you feel that way, it seems

to me that I should do the same.”

“I think it would be for the best.”

Her mother sniffed. “I did not want your father to take up attending the races anyway.”

Phoebe leaned over and placed a soft kiss on her mother’s cheek. Her mother was a stickler for propriety, but given enough time to consider a ticklish matter, her natural inclination was to side with that which was right and fair.

“There. You see? We are in agreement on something else,” Phoebe said.

Her mother dismissed her comment with a flick of her hand, but Phoebe saw the hint of a smile in her eyes.

“You are impossible. But if you are still of a mind to take a walk, you had best go right away. Evening will be here before we know it.”

She was right. And Phoebe desperately needed to clear her head.

“Thank you, Mother. I will not be gone long.”

“Very well.” Her mother reached for her stitchery. “All I ask is that you do not pace outside the drawing room windows.”

Phoebe chuckled and rose to her feet. “For your sake alone, I shall avoid this side of the house entirely.”

Fewer than ten minutes later, dressed in her hat and blue redingote, Phoebe headed out across the lawn and away from the drawing room. She had not given much thought to her direction before leaving the house, but it was not wholly surprising that her feet instinctively walked toward the footpath that led across the fields and through the woods to Dunsbourne Manor.

Memories of the first time she had taken this trail on horseback assailed her as she walked. It had been only a few weeks ago, and yet so much had changed since then. The ground was now covered in golden-brown leaves, and the late afternoon sun shone through partially bare branches. And when she reached the crest of the hill where she had stopped to view Dunsbourne Manor, her emotions swelled. The view remained very much the same, but her perspective had altered completely.

She had come to love the beautiful home and the people in it.

Her breath caught in her throat. Yes. There could be no denying the sentiment that filled her as she looked down on the straw-covered apple tumps at the edge of the orchard, the open doors of the cart shed, and the sunlight reflecting off the house windows. Emily had become the younger sister she had never known. Henry and Oliver were her trusty friends. She could even claim a fondness for Miss Glover that might—on a particularly good day—be reciprocated.

And as for Adam . . . her throat tightened. There were several gentlemen of her acquaintance whom she admired, but she had never

felt for them what she felt for Adam. He had been gone for less than a day, and yet she ached to see him again.

Her thoughts returned to Emily. Not knowing exactly why her brother had suddenly disappeared to London, she was likely feeling unsettled as well. Perhaps they would be a good distraction for each other.

Phoebe glanced at the sky. The sun was beginning its descent, but there was still time to visit Dunsbourne Manor if she was quick about it.

The decision made, she hurried down the leaf-covered path to the river and the footpath that followed it. Picking up her skirts, she ran through the orchard, across the lawn, and around to the front of the house. When she reached the drive, Phoebe slowed her pace to a walk, and by the time she reached the front steps, her breathing was almost back to normal. She knocked on the door. Moments later, Thompson opened it. Phoebe greeted him with a smile, and his blue eyes warmed.

“Good afternoon, Miss Hadford. Do come in.”

Chapter 27

FREDDIE TIED HIS HORSE TO a tree at the top of the rise and studied the lay of the land in the fading light of early evening. He had approached Dunsbourne Manor from the rear, following a footpath the local innkeeper had suggested when Freddie had stopped at his establishment on the pretext of wanting food. It was amazing how much the man had been willing to share after Freddie had complimented him on his watery stew and day-old bread. Learning of this public access to the baron's land had been a gift; discovering that the baron retained very few servants had been the bow on the top. The manor stood in a hollow surrounded by fields and woodland. There were a couple of outbuildings not too far from the main house, and beyond them was an enormous orchard. Freddie noted the browning leaves on the trees and the straw-covered mounds lined up at the edge of the orchard, and for the first time since he'd entered the bank that morning, he smiled. It was perfect. There was enough kindling and wood in Lord Dunsbourne's orchard to fuel a fire large enough to ultimately consume everything the baron owned. All it needed was one or two well-placed sparks.

Like a trapped snake, hate writhed within him. It had been begging for release ever since Freddie's narrow escape had sent him to Charing Cross Coaching Inn for a mount rather than to White's for a celebratory drink. He was unused to failure and the fury it aroused. Indeed, Freddie rarely felt anything beyond eagerness to outwit another or satisfaction over a well-executed scam. If he thought on his past victims at all, it was with little more than callous indifference. None of them had ever made a real attempt to fight back; they had been easy to forget.

Lord Dunsbourne's son was the exception. After his father's death, the young baron had doggedly searched for Freddie. Over the years, it had been mildly amusing to hear of the gentleman's fumbled attempts to uncover clues to Freddie's whereabouts. But there had been nothing diverting about today's close call. Today, the new Lord Dunsbourne had destroyed his carefully laid plans. Hadford's money remained securely in the bank, and Freddie's pockets were empty.

Freddie clenched his hands. He did not know how Lord Dunsbourne had made the connection between Edward Trevors and Freddie Payne, but it made no difference. Edward Trevors was no longer, and after tonight, the baron would have far bigger things to worry about than tracing Freddie Payne. Lord Dunsbourne would pay for his meddling. Freddie would wait until it was fully dark to act. No one would see him enter the orchard, and by the time the baron returned from London, Freddie would be long gone—and so would Dunsbourne

Manor.

Phoebe raised her knitting needles and studied the misshapen mass hanging from them with dismay.

"I am not sure that I have ever failed so completely," she said. "How on earth do you keep your rows even?"

Emily took one look at Phoebe's work and started to giggle. "What exactly were you hoping to make?"

"Can I change my mind midproject? I think this looks much more like a duster than a scarf. It has wiggly edges and all those holes for catching cobwebs."

Emily's laughter increased, and in the chair across from the young ladies, Miss Glover's mouth twitched.

"You have made a valiant initial attempt, Miss Hadford," Miss Glover said.

"Truly you have." Emily attempted to curb her mirth. "You should see the scarf I made for Adam last year. It was the first knitted project I did on my own and there was nothing remotely straight about it. I am not sure that Adam would have known what it was unless I had told him."

"Does he use it as a duster?" Phoebe asked, dropping her work to her knee.

"No." Emily laughed again. "He wraps it around his neck about three times and pretends that it is the warmest scarf he has ever owned."

Phoebe smiled. She was not surprised. Adam would wear it to a state banquet rather than risk hurting Emily's feelings.

"As I have told Miss Norton many times before," Miss Glover said, "practice makes perfect. The scarf she is making this year will be a vast improvement on the last one."

Phoebe sighed. The long length of knitted blue fabric hanging from Emily's knitting needles did indeed look scarf-like. As for Miss Glover, her knitting needles clacked with such speed, it was a wonder to behold. And the second mitten she was creating looked just as perfect as the completed one lying on the arm of the chair beside her.

"I may have to stick with stitchery until I can come for another lesson, Miss Glover. But I thank you for your patience with me."

"I always have extra knitting needles in my bag, Miss Hadford."

Phoebe recognized the elderly lady's indirect invitation and marveled at how far they had come.

"That is very kind of you, but I daresay you have indulged this novice long enough for one day." She set aside her tangled wool, glanced at the window, and gasped. "Oh my. It must be later than I thought."

When Phoebe first arrived, Emily and Miss Glover had been knitting. Upon learning that Phoebe had never learned the skill, Emily had persuaded Miss Glover to give her friend a basic lesson. They had been fully engrossed in the endeavor ever since. It had been a

wonderful reprieve from the worry that had dogged her all day, and Phoebe had completely lost track of time.

With no footmen and only one maid in the house, no one had entered the drawing room to close the drapes or light additional candles. The familiar routine that preceded the coming of darkness in most large homes was absent, and Phoebe had not noticed the dimming light.

"Forgive me, but I must return home immediately." She rose. "My mother will be wondering what has become of me."

Emily set aside her knitting and stood. "It is my fault for keeping you here too long. You cannot go home by yourself in the dark. Oliver will be finished in the cart shed by now. He can take you back in our carriage."

Phoebe was not of a mind to argue. Walking through the woods alone at night was an experience she was happy to avoid.

"Come." Emily was already walking toward the door. "I will go with you to the stable."

In the hall, Thompson handed Phoebe her hat and redingote and gave Emily her cloak, then the two young ladies hurried outside. The gravel crunched beneath their feet, the sound seeming louder than usual in the quiet that accompanied darkness. A breeze had picked up. Phoebe pressed her hand to her hat to secure it more firmly in place.

They turned the corner of the house. In the distance, a black rectangle marked the cart shed. No light showed from within, a sure sign that the men had already left. The stable was closer, and the large doors were outlined by the faint yellow of lamplight. They crossed the yard quickly, and Emily pulled open the door.

"Oliver," she called.

"Yes, miss." Oliver appeared from a nearby stall.

"Miss Hadford needs to return to Charwell Park in our carriage. Would you make it ready?"

If Oliver was surprised by the request, he did not show it. Neither did he ask who would drive the carriage. His service as driver was assumed.

"Right away, Miss Norton."

He put the grooming brush he'd been holding on a nearby shelf and started toward the other end of the stable when the thud of running feet reached them from outside. Moments later, the door burst open and Henry stumbled in.

"Good gracious, Henry." Emily reached for the older man and took his elbow. "Whatever is the matter?"

"Fire." Henry gasped the word, bending over to catch his breath.

Oliver was at his side immediately. "Where?"

"The tumps." He took a rasping breath. "I cut through the orchard t' go t' the 'ouse, and I smelled smoke."

“Are you sure it’s not comin’ from one of the chimneys?”

He shook his head. “Seen it. Doubled back,” he gasped. “Every single one of the tumps we ’ave left is on fire.”

Horror clawed at Phoebe’s throat, leaving her speechless. Surely Henry must be mistaken. There was no sensible reason for the tumps to catch alight. And yet, the old gardener would not have pushed himself to virtual collapse unless he was certain.

“Miss Norton, we’re goin’ to need all the ’elp we can get from the ’ouse,” Oliver said. “Buckets, pails, blankets—whatever people can find to douse the flames. We’ll fill the buckets in the river.”

Oliver’s firm voice sent Emily into action. It did not matter that the groom was the one giving orders to the young mistress; she picked up her skirts and ran for the house.

“We’ve got to get down there, Oliver,” Henry said, wiping the sweat off his forehead with his sleeve. “The wind’s pickin’ up, and if the flames reach the trees, there’ll be no stoppin’ the fire.”

Oliver was already emptying buckets of feed into a large barrel. He handed an empty one to Henry. Phoebe tossed her hat and redingote onto a nearby bench. She could move more freely without them. “I will take two buckets.”

“It’s not safe fer you to be out there, Miss Hadford,” Henry said.

“I can haul a pail of water as well as Miss Glover or Mrs. Foster—maybe better.” Phoebe turned her back on the two men, searching the nearest stalls for anything that might carry water. “Here, Oliver.” She found another bucket of grain and ran it back to him. “Empty this one and give me another. I can carry one in each hand.”

During the short time Phoebe had been in the stable, the darkness outside had deepened. The smell of smoke was now undeniable, and an eerie glow hung over the orchard. With buckets in hand, Oliver, Henry, and Phoebe ran across the yard and into the trees. Ahead of them, the crackle of fire overwhelmed the gurgle of the river; behind them, the sound of frantic voices coming from the house carried on the breeze.

Phoebe focused on keeping Oliver within sight as he wove through the apple trees toward the river. She refused to think on how thick the smoke was becoming or upon how hard her lungs were fighting for every breath. Tree branches grasped at her hair as she passed; the roots tripped her. But she pushed on, drawing ever closer to the flickering orange light.

Suddenly, Oliver disappeared. Phoebe stumbled to a halt, wheezing as she caught her breath. There was no one behind her. She had outpaced Henry, who had already made this run once and was undoubtedly feeling his age. Her head whipped to the left and to the right. The darkness made it impossible to judge direction or distance.

She had to be nearing the river by now. Had the groom reached it already? Phoebe spotted a flash of white up ahead. Oliver's shirt. She chased after him.

The glowing flames had been before them, but now it seemed that Oliver was running parallel to the burning tumps. Was he trying to find a way around them? She heard him shout. But his words were indistinguishable. Phoebe pushed her burning lungs and legs harder, trying to close the gap between them. Then she heard a thud. One minute, Oliver's white shirt was visible, and the next, it was gone.

"Oliver," she gasped. She continued forward. "Oliver!"

Phoebe rounded a tree. A large object rolled into her skirts, and she stumbled. The buckets in her hands fell to the ground as she fought to stay upright.

"No!"

She dropped to her knees, groping in the darkness for the precious buckets. The one on her right had not gone far. She reclaimed it and swung left, her fingers brushing the edge of the bucket that had rolled just out of reach. And then she discovered what had tripped her. There was a third bucket tangled in the fabric folds of her gown. She seized it, her thoughts whirling. It was empty, but the smell of grain lingered inside.

"Oliver!" Fear lent strength to her voice. "Oliver! Where are you?"

The wind blew, and another object rolled toward her. The fourth bucket. With her heart hammering in her chest, Phoebe grasped two buckets in each hand and rose to her feet. The smoke had thickened, dropping visibility to a few feet. She walked forward, brushing another tree with her shoulder. And then she saw Oliver's white shirt again—but this time, it was on the ground.

Dropping the buckets in a heap beneath the tree, she crossed the short distance between them and crouched beside the prostrate groom. She reached for his shoulder and gave it a gentle shake.

"Oliver! Can you hear me?"

Nothing. A sob caught in her throat. Had the smoke been too much for his lungs? She remembered his shout. She'd thought he'd been calling out to someone. Had it been a cry of injury instead? He was too heavy for her to move. She would have to fetch help. Now. She scrambled to her feet. Somewhere to her right, a loud crackle rent the air, followed by the whoosh of fire taking hold. She pivoted. At the edge of the orchard, a tree was engulfed in flames. As she lunged for the buckets, she sensed movement behind her.

"No need to take the pails, Miss Hadford."

Phoebe swung around. A man stood beside the tree, brandishing a thick branch that glowed at the tip with a smoldering burn. Her eyes darted to Oliver, and her mouth went dry. Had this stranger felled him

with his makeshift weapon? She wrapped her hands around the handles of the buckets and faced him.

"On the contrary," she said. The smoke was making her voice rasp, but at least it hid her fright. "I intend to take every one."

He stepped toward her. "I think not."

Even as her knees quaked, she stood her ground, straining to see him through the smoke and darkness. Shoulder-length hair, dark-colored coat, light-colored breeches.

"Who are you?"

"Lord Dunsbourne's scourge."

Freddie Payne. Phoebe took a shaky step back. Dear heaven, what was he doing here? He was supposed to be in London.

Voices—urgent, panicked—reached her through the smoke and brought her back to the nightmare around them.

"You did this! You set the tumps alight."

Even in the poor light, she could see his teeth glint. "It was good of Dunsbourne to provide the fuel for his final downfall, was it not?"

Anger coursed through her veins, and she raised her head. "You are a vile human being, Mr. Payne. And nothing you can do will stop the people at Dunsbourne Manor from fighting this fire."

"Oh, and how many people would that be? Three? Four? Is the baron so desperate for help that he is forced to rely on the daughter of his neighbor to lend a hand?" He laughed. The evil cackle sent shivers down Phoebe's spine, and she turned and ran. The buckets clanged against each other as she swerved around the trees. His footsteps pounded behind her, but she kept her eyes on the fire, knowing that the closer she was to the flames, the closer she would be to other people. The trees began to thin. The smoke intensified, clogging her throat. Raising one arm, she covered the lower half of her face with her elbow—and missed a step. She stumbled. Behind her, Payne must have swung his branch club because it clipped her across the shoulder, and she fell to the ground.

Payne was at her side instantly. He reached for her arm, clamping his fingers around it like a vice.

"Get up," he growled.

Gripping the handle of the only bucket still within reach, Phoebe swung it high and wide. It hit him across the cheek. He cursed, tightening his hold still more and shaking her until she felt that her teeth might fall out.

"Do that again, and I'll leave you in the same state as the other bloke."

He yanked her toward the break in the trees. "It's time for me to leave, and you're going to ensure that I have safe passage." He dropped the branch in his other hand and tore his cravat free of his neck. Then he stood with his face inches from hers, his pale-gray eyes

shining with hatred. "If you try to escape or call out before I put this gag around your mouth, I will turn around and set light to the bushes around the manor. Understood?"

Phoebe fought back her tears. "Yes."

In one movement, he released her arm and pulled the cloth across her mouth. She gagged and then began to cough. He paid no heed, cinching the fabric tight behind her head before ripping the kerchief off from around her neck. She cried out but the sound went no farther than the cravat in her mouth, and before she knew what he was about, her wrists were bound behind her.

Reclaiming her arm in one hand, he picked up his smoldering branch in the other. "This way, Miss Hadford."

Chapter 28

"I SAY, DUNSBOURNE. WHAT DO you make of that?"

Adam forced his eyes open. After a solid twelve hours of hard labor in the cart shed, followed by an almost sleepless night in the Hadfords' carriage, and a chase through the streets of London, exhaustion had finally caught up with him on the return journey. He did not know how long he had been asleep, but judging by the ache in his neck, it had been some time.

He shifted his position and turned his attention to Mr. Hadford. "I beg your pardon."

"Look out of your right-side window."

Adam complied. "It looks like a fire."

"My thoughts exactly. Any idea what might be burning? It appears to be quite large."

"To be honest, sir, I could not even tell you what county we are in at the moment."

"Berkshire. Passed through High Brodmore not more than two minutes ago."

Adam stiffened, all trace of sleep gone. Other than his years away at school, he had lived in this area his entire life. Whatever was ablaze would be familiar to him. He stared through the window, searching for landmarks in the dark. The light seemed to be coming from a hollow. He could just make out the shadowy form of the rolling hills on either side. Smoke made the view hazy, but the closer the carriage drew, the more his heart began to pound.

"Signal the driver to go faster."

"It won't do the horses any good in this terrible air," Mr. Hadford said.

"I realize that." Adam worked to keep his voice even. "But I believe those flames are coming from Dunsbourne Manor."

Mr. Hadford jolted upright in his seat. "Good heavens, man! Why didn't you say so right away?" He reached for his walking stick and rapped on the side of the carriage. Immediately, the vehicle picked up speed.

Adam's thoughts raced along with the carriage wheels. Perhaps he was mistaken. There was plenty of woodland surrounding the house. But if that were the case, the fire would be higher on the hillside. They were close enough now that he could see flames licking the sky. Please, God, he prayed silently. Protect the people at Dunsbourne Manor. Keep Emily safe. Let me get there in time.

"If the fire is on your property, I shall drop you off and go directly to Charwell Park to rally men to assist with putting out the blaze," Mr. Hadford said.

Adam took a steadying breath. "Thank you, sir. That would be most

helpful.”

They were turning onto the drive that led to his home. As soon as they rounded the bend, he would know. The wheels spun on the gravel, but the silence in the carriage was complete. Mr. Hadford’s seat creaked. Adam leaned forward, his eyes glued to the view through the window. And suddenly, there it was. The house loomed out of the darkness, shrouded in smoke but mercifully intact.

“It’s not the house, Dunsbourne. It must be the orchard.”

Gratitude clogged Adam’s throat. His home was safe. At least for now.

“You will forgive me if I exit abruptly.”

“The sooner you leave, the sooner I can go for help.”

Adam caught hold of the door handle and pulled. The carriage was still moving, but he pushed the door open and leaped out. The moment his feet hit the ground, he started to run. He rounded the front of the house. A quick glance told him the stable and cart shed were dark. The orchard, however, was ablaze.

Voices reached him, indistinguishable and faint. Smoke swirled in the breeze, shifting the shadows and making his eyes water and his throat ache. But he kept running, heading directly for the largest fire on the far side of the orchard.

Half a dozen trees were burning. As Adam drew nearer, he could pick out the silhouettes of people flitting in and out of the fire’s glow. He broke through the trees onto the narrow strip of land where the tumps had lain. The mounds were gone. Dark marks, wet and muddy, replaced them. Beyond them, people were lined up a few feet apart from the blazing trees, across the public footpath, and into the river. Adam headed directly toward the man beneath the blazing apple tree. “Henry! What happened?”

The old gardener started. “Lord Dunsbourne!” He had to shout to be heard over the roaring of the flames above. “Thank the ’eavens you’ve come.” Henry looked back down the line. The bucket was still two people away. “Someone set fire t’ all the tumps. We got ’ere as fast as we could, but there’s no betterin’ this blasted wind.”

Someone set fire to all the tumps. The words entered Adam’s heart with crushing force and sent his mind reeling. Who would do this? Had the rumors circulating about him truly become so malicious they had spawned personal vendettas?

A bucket arrived. Adam took it from Mrs. Foster and tossed the water at the tree, then handed the bucket off to the housekeeper again, who ran back toward the river without a word.

“We need more buckets!”

“Oliver and Miss Hadford were bringin’ ’em. They left the stables ahead of me, but we ain’t seen ’em since.”

Adam stared at him through the smoke, his heart taking yet another

hit. "Miss Hadford is in the orchard?"

Henry coughed. "She was. But I don't know what's become of 'er. Or Oliver, fer that matter."

"Has no one looked for them?" There was no hiding Adam's escalating alarm or rebuke.

"No, m' lord. We've been battlin' this fire fer all we're worth. There's just not enough of us—" Henry's voice broke. He coughed—a protracted, racking cough that had him doubled over and gasping for air.

Adam reached for the man's arm and eased him into a sitting position on the ground. Heaven help him. Why was he berating the man who was giving all he had to save the orchard?

"Forgive me, Henry. You have already done so much."

Another bucket arrived. Adam reached for it, tossed its contents at the tree, and passed it off again. The effort was little more effective than if he had spat at the flames. A handful of people and a few buckets of water may have been enough to douse the tumps, but they were no match for this rapidly growing conflagration. He could only pray that Mr. Hadford's help would arrive soon.

A woman shouted. Someone broke away from the bucket line and began running toward the trees. Emily. The diminutive figure wearing a gown could be no one else. Adam chased after her, his long stride rapidly eating the distance between them.

"Emily. Wait!"

Her footsteps faltered, and she turned her head. "Adam!" she cried. He heard the relief in her voice, but she kept moving. "Hurry! Oliver and Phoebe are missing, and I think I saw someone in the trees over there."

How Emily could see anything through the smoke and darkness was beyond him. Already, he could barely make out the people in the bucket line behind them. But she had recognized him from several feet away, and she had never been one to imagine things. If she thought she'd seen something, the chances were good that she had.

They approached the tree line together. Ash floated in the air above them, and Adam's lungs burned. He coughed, straining to identify anything beyond the row of tree trunks.

"What did you see?"

"A shadow. But it moved like a man."

Adam's muscles tensed. In this poor light, it would be impossible to tell the difference between Oliver, Phoebe, or the perpetrator of this fire.

"Where did you see it?" Adam asked.

"Somewhere over here between the trees." She moved closer to the nearest tree and cupped her hands around her mouth. "Oliver!

Phoebe!”

Adam stepped around her and touched the nearest tree trunk. It was warm. None of these trees were on fire yet, but the heat being generated by those that were aflame had reached them. He moved to the next one, scouring the area as far as he could see.

“Oliver! Phoebe!” Emily called out again.

A moan. So slight he barely heard it above the wind. He swiveled. Where had it come from?

“Oliver! Phoebe!” he called.

“Over here.”

The words were little more than a croak, but they were enough. Adam was beside Oliver in seconds. Leaning against a tree, his groom was barely upright. Adam slid Oliver’s arm around his shoulders and wrapped his own arm around the groom’s waist.

“Emily! I’ve found him,” Adam yelled.

His sister came running, her eyes wide. “Oliver! What happened?”

“I tried . . .” Oliver began. Even with Adam’s assistance, the groom could barely move his legs. “Tried to reach you. Couldn’t do it. Had to rest.”

That Emily had seen Oliver’s failed attempt to move out of the trees was nothing short of a miracle. But they needed another one. And they needed it now.

Adam’s grip around Oliver tightened. “Where is Miss Hadford?”

Oliver’s head lolled as he put all his energy into speaking. “Was headin’ fer the fire. Miss Hadford was behind me. Saw a man in the trees. Chased after ’im.” He took a shuddering breath. “He must ’ave hit me on the ’ead. Don’t remember anythin’ after.”

Dread swept over Adam in a tidal wave. If Phoebe had been right behind Oliver, there could be no doubt that the man who had attacked him had seen her. Had he left her for dead too, or was she with him still?

“Who was he?”

“Never . . . never seen him afore.” Oliver sagged against him.

“Emily, he needs water.” Adam had barely spoken the words before his sister was running back toward the river.

“Can you describe the man?”

“Dark jacket. Light breeches. Hair to ’is shoulders.”

Half dragging Oliver away from the trees, Adam recited his words over and over again. Dark jacket. Light breeches. Hair to his shoulders. The description could fit almost anyone. But who would hate him enough to do this? There was only one man for whom he had ever felt such animosity—and he had been in London this very morning.

The vision of Freddie Payne running down the alley in a black jacket,

beige breeches, and shoulder-length hair hit him like a fist to the stomach. He gasped and then coughed on the ash-filled air. Oliver groaned. Adam tightened his grip on the groom and pressed forward. What were the chances that Payne could have reached Dunsbourne Manor before him? With a good horse, it was possible. With Payne's tendency to do the unthinkable, it was probable.

Emily came running with one of the precious buckets. Behind her, another figure loomed, moving slower but with equal purpose.

"There are no cups," Emily panted. "Can you manage with a bucket, Oliver?"

"I daresay."

Adam lowered Oliver to the ground, helping to hold his shoulders up as Emily handed him the bucket. Oliver dipped his hand into the water and scooped it into his mouth. He repeated the action twice more.

"Mercy, Oliver, what have you done?" Mrs. Foster dropped to her knees beside the groom.

"Took an 'ard knock to the 'ead, Mrs. Foster."

"Will you take over here, Mrs. Foster?" Adam asked.

"Of course, my lord." The housekeeper took his place behind Oliver.

Adam rose to his feet, his eyes taking in the scene before him. His orchard—the very thing on which he had pinned his hopes for the future—was on fire. His few remaining retainers were heroically trying, but valiantly failing, to put out the flames, and his groom had been attacked and left for dead. And yet, all he could think of was Phoebe. He had to find her. But where to start? Had she been cast aside in the orchard like Oliver? Or had Payne taken her with him? Phoebe's golden hair would have identified her even if the light were dim, and there could be no doubt that once he saw her, Payne would recognize her. Quite apart from the fact that Phoebe was unforgettable, they had eaten dinner together only a day ago.

He ran his fingers through his hair. One of the reasons Payne had avoided capture all these years was that his targets and scams were wholly unpredictable. But surely, after five years of talking to people with firsthand knowledge of the fiend, Adam had gleaned something he could use to help him find Phoebe now. He turned, blocking out the chaos around him, and focused on the land. Payne was still here somewhere—he could feel it. And now that his dastardly deed was done, he would be anxious to leave. So how would he go?

The only way he could have reached Dunsbourne Manor so quickly was to have come by horse. Where had he left his mount? Far enough away that the animal would not be frightened by the fire but close enough for a speedy getaway. But Payne was not one to hide or act furtively. His characteristic mode of operation was audacity. He

entered a new scheme boldly, in full sight of everyone. Had Freddie entered Dunsbourne land via the front drive? Adam frowned, and then he pivoted to look behind him. Or had the villain entered just like any other local, by following the public footpath?

Emily appeared at his elbow. "Adam, we must find Phoebe."

A sense of urgency throbbed between them. He studied the gentle hillside that separated Dunsbourne Manor from Charwell Park. It was nothing more than a faint, dark outline on a gray canvas, but he knew every rock and tree and shrub along the path. Woodland covered most of the hill. Following the footpath in the opposite direction, however, took a person through pastures. The woodland would be a far better place to keep a horse out of sight.

"Look up there, Emily. Do you see anything out of the ordinary on the hill? Anything at all?"

His sister peered into the darkness. "No."

Adam bit his lip. He had a critical decision to make, and Phoebe's life could well depend upon his making the right choice. Should he search the orchard or the hill?

"Wait!" Emily's said. "There's a speck of light. See it? Halfway up."

Halfway up. That was where the woodland began. He strained to see through the darkness, and suddenly, like the twinkling of a distant star, he spotted it. The next second, it was gone.

"Stay here, Emily," he said. "Mr. Hadford is sending reinforcements. Set them to work on putting out the fire as soon as they arrive."

"But where are you going?"

"To bring Phoebe back," he said, and then he took off running.

Chapter 29

PHOEBE HAD DONE EVERYTHING IN her power to slow Freddie's progress. It had not been hard. Climbing the hill in the dark was infinitely more treacherous than running down it in daylight.

Breathing the smoky air was challenge enough; doing so through a gag was almost impossible. The combination of those things had left her so light-headed, she had been forced to stop multiple times or risk succumbing to unconsciousness completely. Unfortunately, Payne was rapidly losing patience with her, and she had yet to ascertain what form his retaliation would take.

"Get up!" The glowing branch waved wildly in his hand as he yanked her arm viciously with his other. "No amount of playing the victim will help, Miss Hadford. I have yet to feel compassion toward anyone foolish enough to get in my way."

If she could have answered, she would have told him she was quite sure he had yet to feel compassion for anyone at all. As it was, she expended her energy on trying to breathe the toxic air with fabric in her mouth.

Without the use of her hands and arms for balance, her feet slid out from under her on the carpet of dead leaves. Payne pulled her upright. Her gown snagged the bramble bushes. She heard the fabric tear and wondered vaguely if it would be repairable. If she made it out of this experience alive, she might never want to see the dress with its associated terrifying memories again.

Up ahead, a horse nickered. Phoebe turned to look back at the orchard. At least ten trees were now ablaze, and although the haze over the orchard had thickened, she could just make out the flickering shadows of people moving between the river and the fires. A lump formed in her dry throat. All Adam's work, all his dreams for the Dunsbourne estate were quite literally going up in flames.

Anger that this awful man would so callously seek to destroy the family a second time boiled in her veins, and she tore her arm free of her captor's grip.

"I will not go with you," she cried. It came out as a string of garbled sounds. "You are despicable, and I will do nothing that facilitates your escape."

With a furious growl, he lunged at her, but she twisted out of his reach and ran. Payne's glowing branch had given off minimal light—but it had been something. Without it, Phoebe was covering the terrain practically blind. She collided with trees and knocked her shins on boulders. Branches clawed at her hair, and shrubs scratched her arms. But she kept running.

The pounding of feet and the crack of branches behind her told

Phoebe that Payne was in pursuit. The path bent, and Phoebe's feet slipped. With no way to break her fall, she landed on her side, a bramble branch gouging her cheek as she slid to a stop in the bush. Tears pricked her eyes, and she struggled to her feet. But she was too late. Breathing heavily, Payne pounced on her.

"You will pay for that, you little witch." He hauled her upright. Phoebe choked on her silent sobs. She had tried, but it had not been good enough. She wished Adam knew that she had attempted to foil Payne, that she had tried to escape and get word of the felon's whereabouts to someone else. It did not signify that no one else knew of her efforts. Adam was the only one who mattered.

Payne took a fistful of her hair and pulled her face close to his. "Now start walking up the hill."

"Let her go, Payne." Like the crack of a whip, Adam's voice cut through the darkness.

Jolted into action, Payne swung Phoebe around, clamping her up against his torso. Holding perfectly still, Phoebe waited, praying that her ears had not deceived her.

"Dunsbourne? Is that you?" Payne's words were coated with sarcasm and loathing. "You arrived back in time to witness the complete demise of your estate after all."

"Incorrect. I arrived back in time to put an end to your vile machinations."

Phoebe's knees threatened to give way. She had not been dreaming; it had been Adam's voice that she had heard. Focusing on her breathing rather than on Payne's ugly laughter, she tried to clear her head.

"And just how do you intend to do that?" Payne mocked.

"I have a gun."

In the silence that followed, Phoebe thought she heard the sound of hooves over the crackle of the fire and the distant voices.

"Perhaps you do; perhaps you don't. Either way, I have Miss Hadford." He pressed his arm into Phoebe's ribs, causing her to give a muffled cry. "Which is more important to you, Dunsbourne? My life or hers?" "You let her go and I shall let you go," Adam said.

"No!" Phoebe's cry was incomprehensible to anyone but her. She tugged against Payne's arm. Adam must not give up this chance to capture the man who had haunted him for so long.

"You are not very good at this, are you, my lord. Negotiations such as these do not operate on mutual trust."

"Have no fear, Payne. I am well aware that you are the most untrustworthy rat living above ground. Unlike you, however, I am a gentleman, and I am cognizant of the fact that your time to concede is rapidly drawing to a close."

"And why is that?"

Adam stepped into the small circle of light Payne's smoldering branch gave off. "Because in the next few minutes, a small legion of men will come riding over the crest of the hill behind you intent on helping quench the fire you started in my orchard. They are come from Charwell Park, which, as you well know, is Miss Hadford's home. I am quite sure that every one of those men—her father, in particular—would be happy to run you through if you have not released Miss Hadford to my custody by the time they reach us."

Payne was rattled. Phoebe sensed the change in him instantly. His feet shifted uneasily, and he turned his head to glance behind them. The thunder of hooves was unmistakable now. And in the quiet of the night, it sounded like the approach of an army.

"You let Miss Hadford go, and I shall let you go," Adam repeated.

"Drop your weapon," Payne demanded.

Keeping his eyes on Payne, Adam lowered his pistol to the ground.

"Now take three steps back."

"This is as far as I am willing to go, Payne. The gun is no longer in my hand. Release Miss Hadford and you have my word that I will not shoot."

Behind them, the first rider crested the hill. In one swift movement, Payne pushed Phoebe aside and swiped his smoldering branch across the hem of her gown. The fabric caught fire, and he bolted. Horror captured Phoebe's voice. With her arms still pinned behind her back, she staggered backward. The wind rushed by, and the glowing orange light dusting her skirts turned to flames consuming her petticoats.

"Phoebe!"

She had one second to register Adam's call before his arms were around her and he knocked her off her feet. Cradling her head against his chest, he rolled them both across the dirt path and back again. The vibration of hooves rumbled through the earth beneath them. Pressing his back against the shrubs, Adam pulled her clear of the path just before a single horseman galloped by. The moment he was gone, Adam's fingers were pulling at the knot in the fabric behind her head. She felt it loosen. Carefully, he withdrew Payne's cravat from her mouth.

"Forgive me. I did not mean to mistreat you. Rolling your skirts in the dust was the only way to smother the flames before they took hold."

"You . . . you . . ." Her tongue was swollen, and her mouth was dry. She could not form all the words she wanted to say—the ones that told him that he should have gone after Payne but that she was so grateful he had not.

More hooves shook the ground.

"Quickly," he said. "I must free your arms." He ran his hands down her arms until he reached the fabric at her wrists. His fingers pulled at

the knot, but it did not give way. He muttered a curse. The horses were so close Phoebe could hear the high-pitched roaring of their breaths.

"There is no time. They are almost upon us." Adam pulled her close and rolled another half turn so his back shielded her from the flying hooves of what must have been every horse in her father's stable. Dust filled the already smoky air. Adam coughed. Phoebe felt his chest tighten against her cheek as he struggled for air, and she pulled back to give him room to breathe.

"I am so sorry." Her tongue slurred the words, but she could not remain silent any longer. "If not for me, you would have captured Payne."

"Do not say that. Do not even think that." His hand came up to cup her face. "I did not race up this hill to capture Payne; I came to find you."

"But you have been chasing him for years." Tears filled her eyes. "And look at what he has done to your orchard."

His thumb gently wiped away the first trickle of moisture on her cheek. "If it is all the same to you, I would rather not look." He tilted her head so she could see his face. His features were indistinct, but she knew he was looking at her. "You, of all people, know how much those apple trees mean to me, so have you stopped to consider why I am not now in the orchard fighting the fire?"

She had not; she was still coming to terms with the miracle of his arrival on the hill.

"Why?" she asked.

"It is because the moment I arrived in the orchard and learned you were missing, my heart let me in on a secret it has been keeping from me for weeks. As much as I want to see Payne pay for what he did to my father and as much as I need those apple trees to secure my family's finances, you, sweet Phoebe, are more important to me."

Her tears were falling freely now. "But the reason I so desperately want to save the orchard and have Payne securely locked behind bars is because you are most important to me."

His lips brushed hers. No matter the taste of dust and smoke, her heart leapt.

"Later." His voice was low. "Later, we shall revisit this conversation." And then his hands moved to her wrists. "We may have to wait a little longer for Payne, but, thanks to your father's timely assistance, I think there is a good chance we can douse the fire before everything is lost." He tugged on the kerchief, and pain radiated from her wrists to her fingertips. She stifled a moan and shut her mind to the throbbing. Seconds later, her hands were free.

Adam scrambled to his feet. His hand reached for hers. "Can you

stand?”

Every part of her body hurt, but she rose straightway.

“How well do you know this path?” she asked, her grip on his hand tightening as the memories of her recent attempt to escape assailed her.

“Well enough to walk it blindfolded.”

“Then I shall not let go of you.”

He squeezed her fingers gently. “I am glad to hear it.”

Adam reclaimed his pistol from the base of the scrub oak, grateful that he'd thought to set it down at an easily identified spot. He slipped it into his pocket. There was no way of knowing where Payne was now. Adam could only pray that wherever he had gone, he would never return.

Forcing all thoughts of the villain behind him, Adam split his attention between following the footpath and what was happening in the orchard. The fire had spread. His chest ached as he viewed the inferno from the hillside. Almost a quarter of the orchard was now in flames. Shadows flitted back and forth between the trees and the river. Shouts carried on the breeze, punctuating the constant roar of the fire and emphasizing the sense of urgency hovering over the men and women fighting the blaze.

Reaching the last bend in the footpath before the ground leveled and entered Dunsbourne land, Adam increased his pace. At his side, Phoebe kept up. Not once had she complained about the speed at which they'd descended the hill. She had not uttered a word about the pain she must be feeling, even though he had felt the scratches on her face and the blood on her wrists with his own fingers. His admiration of her loyalty and courage swelled. He could not fathom what he had done to earn her affection, but he was determined to do all in his power to be worthy of it.

The number of those fighting the fires at the edge of the orchard had multiplied fourfold. People were passing buckets of water to each other from several spots in the river. The darkness made it almost impossible to identify anyone, but Adam searched the faces of those they rushed by, hunting for Emily or his housekeeper.

"Mrs. Foster will have taken care of Oliver by now. We must have her see to your injuries."

Phoebe was breathing heavily. "I need no special attention, Adam. I —"

The distinctive sound of a gunshot coming from the direction of the house cut her words off. All those around them froze.

"Payne!" Adam released Phoebe's hand and withdrew his pistol. "Stay here. He must not come near you or Emily." Before she could respond, he took off, weaving through the stunned workers and their buckets, away from the fire and toward the manor.

The second gunshot sounded as he passed the stable. He slowed, approaching the corner of the house cautiously, working to regulate his ragged breathing. Leaning against the wall, he strained to hear anything over the crackling of the fire and the neighing of nervous horses.

"It's over, Payne! Walk away."

Toole. After working with the man for five years, Adam would know

his voice anywhere.

“The life of Mr. Hadford in exchange for his carriage,” Payne said. “I daresay the gentleman’s wife and daughter value him over his conveyance.”

Adam tensed. Somehow, Payne had taken Hadford hostage. Based on the gunshots, he would guess the felon had also appropriated the gentleman’s gun. Toole was an excellent marksman. If he had taken a shot, Adam doubted Payne would still be standing.

Counting on the darkness to hide him, Adam inched around the corner of the building and crouched behind the rosebushes that lined the front of the house. From this vantage point, he could see two carriages parked in the drive. Both carried lanterns that illuminated the scene at the foot of the manor’s front steps. Payne stood directly behind Mr. Hadford and held a gun to the gentleman’s head. Mr. Hadford’s carriage was across from them, the driver sitting statuesque on the box, reins still in his hands.

A second carriage was parked immediately in front of the first. This must have been the one transporting Toole because the lawman was taking cover behind the open door. Toole’s driver was nowhere to be seen, but when Adam heard a whinny coming from the front lawn, he spotted the outline of a man and a horse standing in the shadows. Why Payne had abandoned his mount in favor of Mr. Hadford’s carriage was a mystery. How Toole came to be here was similarly baffling. But Adam had no time to ponder such things. He had to act whilst he could yet claim the element of surprise. Ideally, he would like Toole to be in on it. He glanced at the man half hidden behind the carriage door. The runner had yet to respond to Payne, and the prolonged silence was affecting the felon. Gravel shifted beneath Payne’s feet, and he glanced from side to side, the jerky movement conveying his agitation.

“Move.” Payne jabbed the pistol into Mr. Hadford’s temple. The gentleman stumbled two paces closer to his carriage.

“Do not try it, Payne.” Toole’s voice rang with warning. “I would rather take you in without a bullet in your shoulder.”

Avoiding the drive and its loose gravel, Adam moved noiselessly along the flowerbed. Thorns from his mother’s rosebushes snagged his breeches, but he continued moving until he was just outside the circle of light created by the carriage lanterns. Bending down, he scooped up a handful of gravel. Payne and Hadford had their backs to him, but they were now only about ten feet away. The moment he stepped into the light, however, he would be in plain sight of Toole—if the man would only shift his gaze from his target long enough to spot him. Voices sounded from the stables. The gunshots had attracted others. Payne glanced over his shoulder, his pale eyes glowing wildly. The

moment he turned back to face Toole, Adam stepped into the light. He lifted his hand with three fingers raised. Praying that Toole had seen him, he counted to three and tossed the gravel toward the carriage. The small stones hit the door with a clatter. Payne swiveled, and Adam launched himself at Mr. Hadford. The man hit the ground in unison with Toole's gunshot.

Mr. Hadford's muffled cry was eclipsed by Payne's shriek of agony. The blackguard doubled over, dropping the pistol to the ground to clutch his shoulder. Toole was at his side, pocketing the weapon before Payne had taken a step. Adam scrambled to his feet and bent to offer Mr. Hadford his hand.

"I beg your pardon, sir. Toole is a crack shot, but I knew he would not shoot until you were clear."

Ignoring Adam's hand, Mr. Hadford picked himself off the ground. His hat was missing, there was a tear in the knee of his breeches, and he looked to have aged ten years, but he was upright and moving—albeit stiffly. He ran a hand across his mouth.

"My teeth and bones appear to be intact, but I would have you know it would have been far more considerate to knock me onto a grass lawn, Dunsbourne."

"I daresay you are right. You have my apologies."

Mr. Hadford placed his hand on Adam's shoulder. "And you have my deepest gratitude, my lord. Until your timely arrival, I did not see this ending well for me."

"Father!" Phoebe flew across the drive and into Mr. Hadford's arms.

"My dear girl! Your mother is beside herself with worry. As soon as I learned you were missing, I came to Dunsbourne Manor in search of you." He placed his hands on her shoulders and stepped back, seeing her state of disarray and injury for the first time. "I must get you home immediately."

"Adam." Emily arrived close behind Phoebe and reached for his arm.

"What is happening?" Her gown and face were streaked with soot; fear and confusion shone in her eyes.

He moved her away from the Hadfords, away from Toole, who was loading a trussed-up Payne into his carriage, and away from the handful of onlookers who had come from the orchard.

"The man who swindled Father out of almost every penny he owned has finally been captured and is headed to Newgate."

"And the fire?" Emily asked.

"Payne set the orchard alight because I crossed him. I pray it is the last evil deed the man commits."

"It will be." Toole stepped up from behind him. "You have my word on it." He pointed at the orange glow above the house, his face grim.

"Can you recover from this, my lord?"

“Yes.” Adam did not know how. He only knew that he would. “How did you come to be here at just the right time?”

“I tracked down Joe Lambeth soon after he dropped Payne at the Charing Cross Coaching Inn. The innkeeper remembered him because he’d paid handsomely for the fastest horse in the stable, claiming he needed to get to Berkshire by evening. It was not hard to deduce his final destination.” He shrugged. “I paid the innkeeper almost as much for his fastest coach.”

“What became of Payne’s mount? He was riding downhill at a full gallop the last I saw him.”

“I daresay that was his undoing,” Toole said. “According to my driver, the horse overreached his hind hooves. He threw a shoe at the end of your drive. Hadford came upon Payne right afterward, and I assume the scoundrel used his usual trickery to obtain the gentleman’s pistol. He likely would have taken off in Hadford’s carriage had mine not blocked his exit.” The runner glanced back at the stationary vehicles. “Regardless of my timely arrival, however, it was touch-and-go until you showed up. A cornered villain is the worst sort to be holding a gun.”

The thought of how badly the recent skirmish could have gone made Adam feel ill. He wanted Payne gone.

“Remove him from my property, Toole. I have a deadly fire to deal with.”

“Right away, my lord. I’ll have his mount tied to the back of the carriage and will leave it at the first coaching inn we come to.”

A gust of wind sent ash and sparks spiraling over the rooftop. Emily tightened her grip on Adam’s arm. “The wind is picking up and getting colder,” she said.

Toole glanced at the dark sky. “It could be that a storm’s coming in.” They’d had no rain in over two weeks. The dry conditions had helped immeasurably with the harvest but had created tinderbox conditions in the orchard. Was it too much to hope for rain? They needed it now more than ever before. A roll of thunder rent the air, impelling everyone to action. Those who had come to investigate the shooting started back around the house. Mr. Hadford ushered Phoebe into his carriage, and Toole’s driver climbed up onto his box.

“I’m off, my lord,” Toole said. “I shall be in touch.”

He ran for the carriage, and Emily gasped.

“A raindrop!” she cried. “I felt it on my cheek.”

The thunder crashed again, and without further warning, the heavens opened. From the orchard, a cheer arose. Adam’s throat tightened. He had lost track of how many miracles he’d witnessed this evening. Emily tugged on his arm. Rain was streaming down her face, but she was smiling. “Come, Adam. We are needed in the orchard.”

Chapter 30

THE NEXT MORNING, ONE THIRD of the orchard resembled a wasteland. The ground between the river and the orchard was trampled and muddy. Blackened piles of ash were all that remained of the tumps. The trees closest to the footpath were burned to the ground; others stood as black skeletal reminders of what they had once been.

Adam wandered through the charred remains, pausing occasionally to study a singed branch or a tree that was burned on only one side.

"It's a right mess, ain't it, m' lord?" Henry approached from the cart shed.

"It is rather," Adam said. "But if it had not been for Mr. Hadford's men and all the rain last night, we might have lost everything—including the house."

"There's no disputin' that. We 'ave a lot to be thankful fer."

Adam kicked aside a couple of charred metal rings at the base of a blackened stump—all that remained of the buckets Oliver and Phoebe had left behind. He shuddered at the thought of how close they had both come to serious injury. That no one had been killed during the horrific events of the night was astounding.

By the time Adam had finally reached his chambers, the first light of morning had broken through the storm clouds. The last flames had been doused by the rain, Mr. Hadford's men had returned to Charwell Park, and his own household had retired to bed. A warm bath had done much to dispel the clinging smell of smoke and soothe his bruised and battered body, but only complete exhaustion had prevented him from lying awake to dwell on all that had changed in a matter of hours.

In the full light of day, however, it was impossible to ignore Freddie Payne's work of destruction.

"What have we lost, Henry?"

"All the Genet Moyle trees," he said. "And half a dozen King of the Pippins. I reckon the Blenheim Oranges were close enough to the house that they were spared."

"And the tumps that burned were essentially our entire Genet Moyle crop."

"Yes, m' lord. They were the last we harvested, so they 'adn't been sitting out as long as the others."

Adam had guessed as much, but Henry's confirmation of their loss made it seemed more real. Regret hung heavily on his shoulders.

"Was anything in the cart shed damaged?"

"No, m' lord. And mercifully, the stables with all them extra horses from Charwell Park in it was spared as well."

So they still had the small quantity of cider they had already barreled. But more importantly, the mill, the press, and Molly remained functional.

“Your butler told me I would find you out here.”

Adam and Henry swung around to see Mr. Hadford approaching through the scorched trees.

“Good day, Hadford,” Adam said. “I hope you are none the worse for your fall last night.”

“No more so than you, I imagine. From what I gather, the scene in which I played a part was not your first encounter with Payne last night.” He eyed Adam grimly. “I believe I may owe not only my own life but that of my daughter to you, Dunsbourne.”

“How is Phoebe?” It was the question that had been circulating in Adam’s heart and head ever since he’d awakened.

If Mr. Hadford wondered at his use of his daughter’s given name, he gave no sign. Instead, he sighed. “If her mother’s fussing is any indication, she remains precipitously near death’s door. Based on personally observing her eating a hearty breakfast in bed this morning, however, I believe she is more likely to expire from maternal smothering.”

Adam chuckled. “I hope neither scenario is correct.”

“Yes, well, I remain hopeful that after a couple of days, Phoebe will prevail and her mother will allow her out of her room.” He gazed around the blackened ground. “What have you lost?”

“All the Genet Moyles and some of the King of the Pippins.”

Mr. Hadford nodded thoughtfully. “Excellent.”

Adam frowned. That was hardly the response he was expecting.

“I have a proposition for you, Lord Dunsbourne. A precursor to the investment we discussed a few weeks ago, if you will.”

“What is that, sir?”

“According to your own study of the Charwell Park orchard, I own an abundance of heavily laden Genet Moyle apple trees. I propose that you harvest all you need from my orchard to create that flawless blend of apple juices you and Henry perfected last year. In exchange, you sell me the first three barrels of cider you produce this year and give me first right of refusal if you ever desire an investor—or better yet, a partner.”

If there had been a chair nearby, Adam would have dropped onto it. As it was, he remained standing, but barely.

“You wish to give me your apples?”

“Yes. There are plenty on the Blenheim Orange trees for my cook’s needs.” He cleared his throat. “I know Henry here is a master gardener, but it will undoubtedly take a few years to replace so many mature trees. I wish you to consider this agreement in effect until that

time.”

“For someone who prides himself on being a shrewd businessman, this arrangement seems to be sadly lacking in benefits for you, sir.”

“My life and my daughter’s life, not to mention the five hundred pounds Freddie Payne would have walked away with had you not intervened—I believe I am the one coming out ahead with this endeavor, my lord.”

“I hardly know what to say.” Renewed hope. Gratitude. Humility. They all washed over Adam simultaneously.

“Yes, would be a good start. Followed by a time that you wish to meet my footmen in the orchard. I leave it to your discretion as to whether you create the tumps at Charwell Park or transport the fruit here first. You are in charge; I am merely the keeper of the Genet Moyle trees.”

“Yes,” Adam said, his heart lightening. “Henry and I shall be at Charwell Park within the hour.”

Mr. Hadford grinned. “I knew you were a man of action, Dunsbourne. Well done.”

"They're lookin' better already, miss." Lucy set the bowl of foul-smelling ointment on the bedside table and wrapped Phoebe's wrist with a fresh strip of linen.

"I think you are right." Phoebe tried bending her other hand. The wounds Freddie had inflicted still smarted, but she could move her hands without the pain she had experienced last night.

"The grazes don't look near as angry." Lucy smiled encouragingly. "I don't rightly know what Mrs. Wilson puts in her salve, but it works like a charm."

Phoebe gently traced the cut that ran across her cheek. Perhaps if she were very fortunate, Mrs. Wilson's ointment would prevent a scar from forming. She closed her eyes, remembering the feel of Adam's fingers on her face and the feather-light touch of his kiss. Her heart fluttered. She could not tell when she had fallen in love with him, but it had surely happened. There could be no denying her feelings for him any longer.

"Will there be anything else, miss?"

Phoebe opened her eyes. Lucy was gathering her bandaging supplies. She was wearing the new blue dress Phoebe had ordered for her, and it suited her perfectly.

"No, thank you, Lucy."

Her maid smiled. "I'll leave you be, then."

Lucy slipped out of the bedchamber, and Phoebe rose to her feet. She was sore and owned several bruises that had not been there a day ago, but a warm bath and sleep had worked wonders. Her mother was insisting that she stay in her room and rest; Phoebe thought she might go mad if she was not permitted out by tomorrow.

She moved to the window. The blessed rain of last night had passed, leaving the world damp and fresh. Lucy had passed along the news that the footmen and grooms had returned home in the early hours of the morning and that the Dunsbourne orchard fire was out. Phoebe ached for Adam. She wished she could be there with him.

Two swallows swooped in circles outside her window. As they cavorted high above the back lawn, two gentlemen came into view, cutting across the grass toward the orchard. Phoebe's breath caught. Adam. She knew his walk, the curl of his dark hair beneath his hat, and the way he tilted his head slightly as he listen to Henry beside him. She pressed her hand against the glass as though it made him nearer. He stopped. Turning around, he studied the house. And then he saw her. Through the window and across the distance that separated them, their eyes locked. Her stomach fluttered. He raised his hand, and she smiled. He smiled in return. Henry said something. Adam nodded, and with one last glance her way, he turned and walked on toward the orchard.

Phoebe watched until they were lost in the trees, and then she lowered herself carefully onto a chair. Why were Adam and Henry at Charwell Park when there must be so much to do at Dunsbourne Manor?

A knock sounded on the door.

"Come in."

The door opened, and her mother entered carrying a vase of roses.

"Oh, how lovely," Phoebe said. "Where did they come from?"

"Lord Dunsbourne. He dropped them off for you, and I had one of the maids put them in water." Phoebe's heart began to pound, but her mother paid her no mind. She was slowly turning the vase, examining each blossom. "Lady Bloxley told me that the baron's mother was a great one for roses, but to think that they are still blooming this late in the season. That really is something."

"Did . . . did he send a note?"

"He did." Her mother passed her a small envelope.

Phoebe broke the seal and opened it. The message was short.

Thinking of you, Adam.

She glanced at the window, wishing she could see him still.

"Do you know why Lord Dunsbourne is here?" she asked.

Her mother set the roses on the mantelpiece. "Your father said something about sending apples from our orchard to Dunsbourne Manor to make up for the ones they lost last night."

Phoebe's heart swelled. "That was very thoughtful of Father."

"That is exactly what I said, but he told me it was nothing to what the baron has done for him." She sat in the chair opposite Phoebe's and fixed her with a penetrating gaze. "He left to meet with Lord Dunsbourne immediately after sharing that vague yet potent remark, so I should like you to tell me precisely what he means by it."

Phoebe fiddled with the note in her hands. Caring for Phoebe's physical wellbeing had been her mother's sole focus from the moment she had arrived home last night. To her mother's credit, she had not pressed Phoebe for details regarding her experience at Dunsbourne Manor, and although she must have been teeming with questions, her mother had prioritized Phoebe's need for sleep over her desire for answers. Phoebe was not sure how much her father would wish her mother to know about his finances or how much Adam would wish her to know about his history with Freddie Payne, but her mother deserved to be told what had happened at the manor last night.

"I will tell you what I can from my perspective," she said. "But you will need to ask Father for his side of it."

"Fair enough," her mother said. She folded her hands upon her knee and waited.

Leaving the details of Adam's involvement in foiling Payne's scheme

to ruin her father for him to explain, Phoebe told her mother that a villain known to both men had arrived at Dunsbourne Manor bent upon destroying the place. She told of the fire, of her capture by Payne, and of her subsequent rescue by Lord Dunsbourne. She then rehearsed the peril her father had faced before the baron's intervention outside their carriage.

By the time she finished, her mother was ashen.

"You could have been killed." Her mother pressed her hand to her throat. "You both could have been killed."

"Yes. Which is likely why Father made the comment he did about Lord Dunsbourne."

"Good heavens. The man is a hero." Her mother was coming out of her initial shock. "He deserves far more than a cartload of apples."

"My guess would be that the baron considers the apples a perfect payment."

"That may suit as your father's form of appreciation, but I am quite sure I can contrive some other way of thanking him." She appeared to ponder the matter, and Phoebe grew uneasy.

"No lavish celebratory banquet or ball, Mother. Lord Dunsbourne would hate it."

"There is no need for me to plan anything of the kind. Lady Bloxley's Autumn Ball is only days away. That will be a perfect location for me to whisper a few words of appreciation." She rose to her feet. "I am going to ring for tea. After what you have been through, we must do everything we can to build your strength."

Phoebe was not fully convinced that her mother had put the matter of Adam's uncelebrated heroism to rest, but it seemed that for now, the subject was closed.

Chapter 31

ADAM GLANCED AT HIS POCKET watch. Emily was late. He rose from his chair beside the fire and paced across the study to his desk. It had been five days since he'd held Phoebe in his arms on the hillside, four days since he'd sent her flowers and seen her in the upper window at Charwell Park, and two days since he'd received a basket of pasties and a note in return. He picked up the folded paper on the corner of his desk and read it for perhaps the hundredth time.

Dear Adam,

The roses are beautiful. Their scent fills my room with thoughts of Dunsbourne Manor and of you and Emily. I am healing well, although my mother is adamant that I must remain indoors a little while longer. She has agreed that I may attend Lady Bloxley's ball on Saturday, however, and I very much hope that I shall see you and Emily there.

Father tells me that the Charwell Park apples have been transported to Dunsbourne Manor and that you have begun milling once more. I have no doubt you have been working long hours in the cart shed, so I am sending you some pasties—you did say they were your favorite—as I am equally sure you are neglecting your meals.

Sincerely,

Phoebe

He smiled ruefully. The pasties had been marvelous—and had indeed made up for missing luncheon that day.

That she had come to know him so well in such a short period of time was somewhat unnerving; that he had missed her so acutely this week was even more telling. He glanced at his pocket watch again. Never before had he wished to attend a ball so badly, and never before had he been so delayed.

The clatter of running feet reached him from the passageway. Seconds later, Emily burst into the study.

"Forgive me, Adam." She was out of breath. "I had not anticipated how long it would take to dress my hair without Lucy's assistance." Like a relentless thorn, guilt that Emily had gone without so much these past five years pricked his heart. Thankfully, the Charwell Park apples had placed his cider production back on track, which meant that in the not-too-distant future, he could acquire Emily a lady's maid. And a few more gowns.

He smiled at her and offered her his arm. "It was worth the wait. You look lovely." Her thick dark hair was pulled up in a simple twist, with a few ringlets hanging around her face. She was wearing her second

new gown. "I believe Mother would be very proud of you tonight." She slid her arm through his. "Just as Father would be immensely proud of you," she said.

Adam glanced at the painting of his father over the fireplace, and for the first time since the former Lord Dunsbourne's death, he felt peace regarding the past and optimism for the future.

"I pray you are right," he said.

She smiled. "I am sure of it."

Thompson handed them their outerwear as soon as they stepped into the main hall, and when the butler opened the front door, Oliver was standing beside the readied carriage. The groom's forehead was a deep-purple color, but he greeted Adam with a deferential nod and a smile.

"No double vision tonight, I hope," Adam said.

"No, m' lord. I'll be seein' apples spinnin' 'round the mill in my dreams for some time yet, but I can manage a drive to Bloxley Hall without difficulty."

Oliver was right. The journey was blissfully uneventful, and it was not long before they were pulling up in front of the Earl of Bloxley's stately home. Lights shone from each of the many windows, and lanterns illuminated the grand portico.

"Oh my!" Emily gazed out of the window with wide eyes.

Sensing his sister's mounting apprehension, Adam reached out and patted her hand. "Bloxley Hall is a large house, Em. Nothing more. You will know many of the attendees already."

She nodded. "Will Phoebe be here?"

"I hope so."

She looked at him then, a slow smile replacing her worried expression.

"I believe you are rather taken with Miss Hadford, Lord Dunsbourne."

Grateful that the darkness hid the color creeping up his neck, he assumed her formal tone. "Is that so, Miss Norton?"

"Yes." The carriage stopped. "Not that you need or desire it, of course, but should you choose to act upon those leanings, you have my wholehearted approval."

He chuckled. "I am glad to hear it. I appreciate your candor and shall take your opinion under consideration."

Oliver opened the door. Adam exited the carriage and extended his arm to his sister.

She stepped out and smiled at him. "Shall we go and find her together?"

Although most of her guests had already arrived, Lady Bloxley was still receiving people at the entrance of the enormous ballroom.

"Ah, Lord Dunsbourne and Miss Norton," she said, greeting them warmly. "I was so hoping you would come. It is lovely to see you."

Adam blinked. He had expected Lady Bloxley to be polite, but he had not expected effusion. He bowed, and Emily curtsied.

"Thank you, my lady. We are honored to be here," he said.

"I believe the honor is mine, my lord."

Hiding his perplexity with another bow, he led Emily into the ballroom.

"Lady Bloxley barely glanced at you at the Webbs' ball, but she seemed awfully glad to see you this evening," Emily whispered. "Are her moods known to be so changeable?"

"Not to my knowledge," Adam said. "I am as surprised as you are."

They paused at the threshold, and Adam scanned the room. It was crowded. Some ladies sat along the perimeter of the dance floor; others stood talking in small clusters. Many were dancing.

"I see Phoebe," Emily said. "She is not far from the orchestra, dancing with Mr. Webb."

Adam was wholly unprepared for the rush of possessiveness that swept over him at Emily's words. Forcing the muscles in his arms to relax, he directed his attention to that corner of the dance floor and spotted Phoebe immediately. She was a vision in a pale-pink gown. Her golden hair was piled upon her head in soft curls and was topped with a thin coronet of small pink roses.

The music began to slow, and Adam realized that the minuet was coming to an end.

"Shall we walk that way?" he said.

Emily nodded, and they started around the room. They had not gone far when Lord Trimble hailed him.

"Good to see you, Dunsbourne. It has been far too long."

"It has indeed." Adam could not actually remember the last time he'd spoken to the viscount. The gentleman had seemed old when Adam was a boy; he was doddering now. Adam offered him a polite nod and kept walking.

"Good evening, Lord Dunsbourne." Mrs. Smead smiled widely at him and then offered a meaningful glance at her wisp of a daughter. The young lady bobbed a curtsy.

Adam inclined his head. "Good evening, Mrs. Smead. Miss Smead."

"I say, Dunsbourne, good show." Colonel Palmer broke away from a small group of gentlemen to greet him. "Your father—God rest his soul—would be very well pleased with the gentleman you have become."

"Thank you, sir." Adam was beginning to feel extremely uncomfortable. For some unaccountable reason, he had gone from being a social pariah last month to being the object of everyone's highest regard this evening.

Emily gave a gentle tug on his arm. Out of the corner of his eye, he

saw Phoebe and Derrick Webb leaving the dance floor.

“My apologies, Colonel. If you would excuse me, there is someone my sister and I must speak with.”

“Of course. Of course.”

Purposely avoiding eye contact with anyone else, Adam set his course for the corner of the room where Miss Webb and Miss Chapman were standing, waiting for Mr. Webb to return Phoebe to them.

“Hurry, Adam,” Emily said. “We must reach Phoebe before Mr. Smythe does.”

“Unfortunately, even if I deliver you to Phoebe before he arrives, she will leave again the moment he asks her for the next dance.”

“I am not worried about being left with Miss Webb and Miss Chapman.” Emily’s tone was the same one she used if ever he suggested that she spent too much time reading—one that hinted at him being an idiot. “I am merely concerned that you be the next one to escort Phoebe onto the dance floor, not Mr. Smythe—or any other gentleman, for that matter.”

“Ah,” Adam said, smiling at his sister’s loyalty. “Well, that, perhaps, I can manage.”

Increasing his pace slightly, they joined Miss Webb and Miss Chapman just as Mr. Webb and Phoebe arrived.

“Evening, Dunsbourne.” The greeting was unusually cordial, coming from Mr. Webb, but the bouncer would not meet Adam’s eyes, and after offering Phoebe a slight bow, he walked away.

“May I have the honor of the next dance, Miss Hadford?” Adam asked. Phoebe smiled shyly, and Adam reminded himself to breathe.

“Thank you, Lord Dunsbourne,” she said. “I should like that very much.”

Emily stepped aside to talk to Miss Webb, and Adam offered Phoebe his arm. A few feet away, Mr. Smythe’s path deviated toward Miss Chapman. Adam could not bring himself to feel sorry for the gentleman. Phoebe belonged with him. He knew it as surely as he knew that his glove fit his hand.

He walked her into the center of the ballroom. Awareness of her hand on his arm and the gentle swish of her gown brushing against his leg displaced all other thoughts. Friendly greetings and smiles of acknowledgment followed them, but he barely noticed. His sole focus was on the beautiful woman at his side.

“Do your wrists pain you still?” he asked. Her gloves covered the area where the cloth had cut into her flesh.

“They are much improved,” she said. “Lucy thinks that Mrs. Wilson’s salve is magical. I am inclined to believe her.”

He smiled. That she could be so positive about so miserable an injury was remarkable.

“Thank you for the pasties. I did not write to tell you how much Henry, Oliver, and I appreciated them because I hoped to tell you so in person this evening.”

“Was I right? Did they replace a meal you should have taken earlier?”

He chuckled. “I fear you have come to know me far too well.”

“Not yet, my lord.” Her expressive eyes held his. “I believe there is still much for me to learn.”

The music started, and they began the allemande’s first step sequence. They moved together and apart, turning, promenading, and exchanging places with those around them. And all the while, the pleasant nods and smiles directed at Adam continued. When Phoebe was at his side once more, he broached the subject.

“At the risk of revisiting a topic that ended badly for us the last time we danced, do you know why my presence at Lady Bloxley’s ball is provoking such positive attention among those who blatantly ignored me only a fortnight ago?”

Her cheeks were suddenly the same color pink as her gown. “I believe I do.”

Almost afraid to ask, Adam raised his eyebrows. She stepped away to complete the next dance sequence, returned, and took his hand again.

“When my mother learned how you rescued me and then went to the aid of my father on the night of the fire, she made the determination that your valor should not go unnoticed.” Phoebe swallowed hard.

“Please forgive her. She meant only good by it. But I believe she has used the very means that condemned you earlier to raise you onto a hero’s pedestal. A few well-placed, whispered words have spread through this ballroom faster than I would have believed possible.” She met his eyes again, but this time, they were troubled. “Once more, you are a victim of the powerful effect of Society gossip.”

The dance steps separated them, and Adam attempted to bring his scattered thoughts together without losing his place completely. He reclaimed Phoebe’s hand.

“You mean to tell me that all those people who thought me a blackhearted villain now consider me a valiant hero—simply because someone told them it was so.”

“Reputations are rarely so quickly altered, but in this instance, I think people wanted to believe something different of you, so they have embraced the report.” Her gaze softened. “You never truly fit the villainous role of the earlier rumors.”

Adam took a moment to contemplate what it might mean if the stigma previously attached to his name were removed—how it would alter things for Emily, his business transactions, hiring servants, and a future with Phoebe. His heart lifted, and he allowed an extra portion of hope to enter in.

The music ended. All around them, gentlemen bowed, ladies curtsied, and couples began to clear the floor. Adam did not release Phoebe's hand.

"Would you care to take some air?" he asked. "If memory serves, there is a large terrace beyond the french windows."

At Phoebe's nod, he led her out of the ballroom.

Stars sparkled in the night sky. The air was cool. Another couple walked by, their footsteps echoing across the flagstones as they moved to the other side of the wide terrace. Adam guided Phoebe toward the far corner, where an ornamental tree offered a modicum of privacy. They stood side by side, looking down upon the vast lawn beyond the stairs.

"This new report circulating the ballroom is less damning but hardly more true than the first, Phoebe. You and I both know that I am no great champion. But neither am I the ruthless scoundrel many considered me to be. I am simply a man who is striving to better himself and his family's situation."

"Those things, in and of themselves, would be laudable, my lord, but you have done far more than that. Your unfailing efforts removed a heartless felon from the streets of England."

He offered her a small smile. "I rather think we managed that together. If you had not recognized the man calling himself Edward Trevors or slowed Freddie Payne's escape from Dunsbourne Manor, the fiend would still be free."

"That is true." Her eyes sparkled brighter than the stars. "Some might even say that we make a good team."

Adam lifted his free hand to cup her face. She leaned her cheek into his palm, and he took an unsteady breath.

"Those people would be right. I cannot conceive of anyone I would rather have by my side than you."

"Neither can I," she whispered.

Releasing her hand, he slipped his arm around her and drew her close. "Then I should very much like to continue the conversation we began on the hillside."

She leaned closer and tilted her head toward his. "I think . . . I think this might be the perfect time to do that."

His lips met hers, and there was nothing in his world but Phoebe. She smelled of roses and tasted of mint, and she fit in his arms as if she were always meant to be there. Her fingers reached into the hair at the nape of his neck, sending tremors coursing through him. He deepened the kiss, soaking in the wonder of this moment.

On the other side of the terrace, a door opened, setting free the orchestra music and the hum of voices from within the ballroom. The poignant reminder that they were not alone filtered into his

consciousness, and he slowly raised his head. Phoebe stayed close, the rapid beating of her heart reaching him through his jacket.

"Phoebe." He spoke softly. "Would you permit me to officially court you?"

"May we walk together through the orchard?"

He smiled into the darkness. "Would you like that?"

"Very much. I find that I miss being there more than I could have imagined."

"Then, yes, we shall walk through the orchard as often as the weather allows. And as I believe your father plans to enlist Henry's help to tame the trees at Charwell Park, perhaps we might walk there too."

She pulled back a little. "May I also visit you in the Dunsbourne cart shed?"

"With or without pasties?"

She laughed softly. "Whichever you would prefer."

He pulled her close again and pressed his lips to hers. "What I would prefer," he said, touching his forehead to hers, "is a very short courtship."

"Why is that?"

"Because I have fallen deeply in love with you, Phoebe Hadford, and once we are married, my opportunities to kiss you will not be limited to the orchard and the cart shed."

She touched his face. "I love you too, Adam, and a short courtship sounds rather wonderful."

Footsteps echoed across the flagstones, moving nearer.

Adam released his hold on Phoebe and offered her his arm. "Then I have one last question, my love."

She looked up at him. "What is that?"

"Do you think your mother would be very put out if a third rumor about Lord Dunsbourne supplants the second this evening?"

Her eyes widened. "Whatever do you mean?"

"My ballroom etiquette may be a little rusty, but I seem to remember that if a gentleman asks a lady for a second dance it is because he wishes to single her out—and such things are duly noted by the matrons in the room."

"Who rarely withhold their observations from anyone else," Phoebe said, and he could hear the humor in her voice.

"Exactly. It is a risk."

"But one you are willing to take?"

They were dangerously close to the french doors, but he turned and bowed politely. "Miss Hadford, I have put off being truly happy for over five years. I do not wish to postpone it any longer. Would you do me the honor of the next—our second—dance and then brave the consequences with me?"

She rose onto her toes and brushed her lips across his. “Yes, Lord Dunsbourne. It would be my pleasure.”

Author's Note

DURING THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY, FORGERY became an increasingly troublesome issue. It led to debates over the authenticity of scriptures and accusations of fraudulent work leveled at numerous authors, including Milton and Johnson. One of the greatest concerns during this time period, however, was the falsification of bank notes.

Paper money was relatively new in England, and as counterfeit notes began to circulate, it quickly became apparent that this was something that had the potential to undermine the entire economic and monetary system of the country. Conviction of forgery was punishable by hanging under the Bloody Code, but remarkably few people were sentenced to death for the crime.

Although Freddie Payne is a fictional character, his exploits are loosely based on the life of the eighteenth-century forger Charles Price. Born in London about 1730, Price tricked the hosier he worked for by posing as Henry Bolingbroke Esq. and stealing ten pounds' worth of silk stockings. He also duped a grocer into exchanging his forged notes and tricked an eminent merchant in the city out of five hundred pounds through an elaborate scheme designed to aid the merchant's Dutch friend. Unfortunately, that merchant did not have Lord Dunsbourne or Phoebe Hadford to alert him to the trickery, and he lost his money.

When Charles Price died, a box was discovered containing two artificial noses that he had used as part of various disguises. The authorities also uncovered counterfeit plates buried in a field along with a rolling press and other materials needed to create bank notes. During his lifetime, it is thought that Price stole upward of one hundred thousand pounds (which would be worth close to \$20,000,000 today), and he did it all through duplicity and forgery.

About the Author



SIAN ANN BESSEY WAS BORN in Cambridge, England, and grew up on the island of Anglesey off the coast of North Wales. She left her homeland to attend Brigham Young University, where she earned a bachelor's degree in communications, with a minor in English.

She began her writing career as a student, publishing several articles in magazines while still in college. Since then, she has published historical romance and romantic suspense novels, along with a variety of children's books. She is a USA Today best-selling author, a Foreword Reviews Book of the Year finalist, and a Whitney Award finalist.

Sian and her husband, Kent, are the parents of five children and the grandparents of three beautiful girls and two handsome boys. They currently live in Rexburg, Idaho, and although Sian doesn't have the opportunity to speak Welsh very often anymore, Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrob-wlllantysiliogogoch still rolls off her tongue.

Traveling, reading, cooking, and being with her grandchildren are some of Sian's favorite activities. She also loves hearing from her readers. If you would like to contact her, she can be reached through her website at www.sianannbessey.com; her Facebook Group, Author Sian Ann Bessey's Corner; and on Instagram, @sian_bessey.

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Chapter 1

Finley Park, Surrey 1772

“NO GIRLS MAY ENTER MY treehouse.”

Rosalind Ainsworth placed her hands on her hips and glared at the foliage above her head. “I am not a girl; I am a young lady.”

Sebastian Lumley, Lord Hartford’s, face appeared through the greenery. “You are a girl.” The future Duke of Kelbrook was nothing if not dogmatic. “But even if you were a young lady, it would not matter. This is *my* fortress, and until we are married and I am obligated to admit you, you may not come up.”

At eleven years of age, Rosalind had given marriage little more than a fleeting thought. But this much she knew: she would never marry the ill-mannered fourteen-year-old currently shouting at her from the midst of the large oak tree on the grounds of Finley Park. “If marriage to you is my requirement for entry, I shall never set foot in it.”

“Yes, you will.” His scowl matched her own. “When you are one-and-twenty. My father told me so.”

Rosalind barely caught her vehement denial before it burst forth.

Although some might consider her still a girl, she had sufficient training to know that one never contradicted a duke, even when what he purportedly said was ludicrous. She clenched her fists. “Jonas, I am returning to the house,” she called.

“Very well.” Her younger brother’s voice floated down to her. By virtue of his gender, he was already encamped in Lord Hartford’s lofty fort, and although she recognized the hint of regret in his words, she knew he would not sacrifice his opportunity to play in the treehouse to keep her company.

Turning her back on the oak tree and its male occupants, she marched away with her head held high. The unfairness of the situation stung, but at least she could have the satisfaction of proving Lord Hartford wrong. Her father may be merely a viscount, but his word was as good as the duke’s. He would tell her exactly how she could refute the infuriating young nobleman’s claim that she would one day be his wife. And tomorrow, after she had put Lord Hartford right, her family would leave Finley Park and she need never speak to the irritant again.

The sound of voices penetrated Rosalind’s stormy thoughts, and she turned to see her mother and the duchess walking together through the rose garden on the other side of the expansive lawn. The flowers were in bloom, and Rosalind knew full well that her mother would linger there as long as possible. Rose gardens were one of Lady Langton’s favorite places.

Not wishing to settle for doing something so demure when she could

have been climbing a rope ladder into a tree, Rosalind veered away from the ladies and toward the house's large stone terrace. Raising her skirts, she hurried up the eleven stairs—she knew there were eleven because she had counted them on her way down—and ran across the smooth flagstones to the french doors leading to the library. At the threshold, she paused a moment for her eyes to adjust to the dimmer light.

"Well, good afternoon, young lady. Have you been enjoying the Finley Park grounds?"

Her father, Lord Langton, sat in a capacious leather armchair beside the fireplace, a thick book on his knee.

"Not really," she said, her shoulders drooping. Now that she was indoors and away from Lord Hartford's eyes, there was no need to keep up the appearance of indifference.

"Dear me. That is not the response I expected from someone who has been given the freedom to explore the grounds of one of the finest houses in England."

"Not complete freedom," Rosalind said. "I was not allowed into Lord Hartford's treehouse."

Her father set his book on the corner table beside his chair. "And why is that, child?"

"Because I am a girl." Hot tears pricked her eyes, but whether they were caused by frustration or disappointment, she could not tell.

"Ah, I see." Her father patted the spot beside him on the chair. She crossed the room quickly and squeezed into the small space. Her father put his arm around her shoulders and drew her close. "Am I to assume that your brother is currently in said treehouse?"

"Yes. Jonas is two years younger than me, but he was allowed in simply because he's a boy."

"Perhaps Lord Hartford wished to spare you the difficulty of climbing up the ladder in a gown."

"He cannot possibly care about that. My gowns will surely be bigger and wider when I am one-and-twenty."

Her father frowned. "What does being one-and-twenty have to do with climbing the ladder?"

"Lord Hartford said I cannot enter the treehouse until we are married and that the duke told him the wedding would occur when I turn one-and-twenty." Rosalind stiffened. "But he is wrong. I will never marry someone so odious as Lord Hartford."

Her father remained uncharacteristically silent.

She stole a glance at him. At the sight of the troubled lines creasing his brow, the first whisper of unease entered her heart. "Father?"

"Lord Hartford is correct, Rosalind. The marriage agreement between the two of you was written when you were an infant. It states that you

are to be wed when you reach your twenty-first birthday.”

If Rosalind could have leaped from the chair, she would have. As it was, her father’s arm held her in place even as his devastating words sank into her heart. “You cannot mean that. I would rather never marry at all than marry Lord Hartford.”

Her father shook his head. “I do not think you will feel the same when you are older.”

“Yes, I will.” She was as adamant as she was horrified. “I cannot think of one thing that Lord Hartford has to recommend him.”

“Not one?”

Rosalind clasped her hands together in a vain attempt to control their trembling. “No. Not a single one.”

“He is to be the Duke of Kelbrook. Does that mean nothing to you?”

“Only that he will be even more pompous when he’s older than he is now.” A vision of gangly Lord Hartford wearing a white wig and ordering her to do his bidding filled her mind. She shuddered and reached out to clutch her father’s sleeve. “Please, Father. You must do something. Tell the duke it was all a big mistake.”

“I cannot do that, Rosalind.” His eyes were serious now. “The contract was signed in good faith. The duke and I have been close friends for decades, but he has done us a great courtesy to agree to this match.”

“But *I* never agreed to it.” Desperation clawed at her throat, leaving her voice raspy.

“You are eleven years of age. You do not have a say in the matter.”

Rosalind had rarely heard her father speak so sternly. She swallowed hard and removed her hand from his arm. No say? But it was her life. Her future.

“I signed the document,” he continued. “I am honor bound to uphold it. As my daughter, you are similarly obligated.”

Rosalind scrambled to her feet. This time, he did not stop her. She wanted to scream, to cry, and to beg him once more to reconsider. But already, she knew it was useless. He was resolute. Forcing her leaden feet forward, she moved toward the door.

“It is for the best, Rosalind. I truly believe that.”

She kept her face averted as her tears began to fall. It mattered little that her father believed it. She did not.

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